

A Time For Us

by billted

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Summary: Gabrielle finds love with a visitor from the future. But what effect will their relationship have on Xena?

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This story contains a small amount of explicit (but not graphic) heterosexual sex as well as a small amount of mildly explicit violence in keeping with the level of violence on the TV show. It also contains a very small amount of what some may consider coarse language.

Some of the characters and background situations in this story are the legal property of Universal/MCA. Any characters or situations not borrowed from the television show belong to me.

This story was completed in July of 1998.

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A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART ONE

Professor David Gold sipped a hot cup of black coffee in the descent room as he waited for the others to arrive. His apprehension about the impending expedition was, as always, balanced by an equal portion of excitement. He had been privileged to go on two others -- the founding of the United States and the rise of Hitler -- but this one would be the furthest he or anyone else had ever gone.

He and Scott had arrived early in order to get changed and to have

time to mentally prepare before Dr. Shanty (his new boss, the dean of the Mythology department) and the always bustling technical crew arrived. He had finished dressing sooner than Scott and had left him in the dressing room.

The door opened and Professor Scott Chambers walked in, his outfit now matching David's -- a mid-length tunic tied about the middle. Scott's short, wavy dark hair, dark eyes, and trim dark beard were in sharp contrast with the white tunic. They also contrasted with David's shoulder length golden hair and gray eyes. David's light hair and eyes made him in his tunic almost seem like a solid pillar of white. Both men were rather well built, with David being a bit shorter than Scott's six feet, as well as being a few years younger. Each fancied himself looking rather classical in the ancient Greek garb.

David looked at Scott, extended his bottom lip, raised one eyebrow, and slowly nodded. "You wear it well," he said. "I know," replied Scott with a grin.

David laughed a bit and, scrutinizing his own tunic, said, "No pockets."

"Who needs pockets?" replied Scott. "We've got a little money in a pouch, that's all we need." He took a deep breath. "Yep, this kind of work separates the men from the boys, as they used to say. No technology except the Lorien pod goes with us. We won't even take a pencil and paper, for crying out loud."

"You're right," agreed David. "Just two human beings armed with nothing but their minds, making observations and bringing them back to a waiting world."

They caught each other's eye and both snickered at how philosophical they had waxed. David took another sip of coffee.

"You, my friend," Scott said, "are going to live in ancient Greece for one month. I hope you can do without coffee for that long." He twisted open a bottle of mineral water. "Now this stuff, ahhh, I can get this pretty much anywhere and any time. In fact, the further in the past, the better, I imagine." He guzzled liquid from the green bottle.

"The ancient Greeks had some form of coffee, didn't they?" David asked, seeming a bit worried.

"It's our job to find out just what they had and what they didn't have," Scott replied. "Welcome to the Mythology department."

This was David's first expedition for Mythology. He had requested the transfer himself. He had been with the History department ever since he came to the University five years ago. He had certainly relished his work there, especially the expeditions. They were trips into well-documented history, and his job, and that of other travelers, was to scout for nuances that had been left out of the records. (It had proven quite interesting at times, especially on the Hitler expedition. Most of what was known about Hitler's rise was written by the Nazis themselves, who had left out quite a few significant, unflattering details.) But the trips, his and those of others in the department, had begun to take on, for him, an almost predictable

quality. He had envied people like Scott, who worked every day with the unknown. The Mythology department's job was to gather data that separated myth from fact, legend from reality. Who could trust the reliability of the ancient writings? With Lorien's development of the time pod that bore his name, modern man could find out for himself what really took place in antiquity.

"Yeah, this is the place where the real research gets done, isn't it?" mused David.

"Don't kid yourself," chided Scott. "It's all important. What you did with History -- clearing up supposedly documented events -- that's the stuff that has real impact on us here and now in 2085. Everybody knows the ancient scrolls are three quarters bunk, but people accept as fact the more recently recorded history. Exposing the garbage in those writings -- that makes a difference." He took another gulp of mineral water and changed the subject. "So how's your ancient Greek?"

"I think I'd call myself fluent at this point," David said. "I guess I'd better be."

"There you go, kidding yourself again," Scott said, not looking at David. "You know what the worst part is about learning dead languages? It's that we don't know squat about how real people talked. We've studied textbook ancient Greek, gathered from all the scrolls we've found. But it'll take a little time to pick up conversational Greek, and we can only do that when we're back there." He moved as though he might drink again, but changed his mind. "Really, that kind of language data is one of the most valuable things we gather when we go back so far."

"Did you have that problem on the King Arthur expedition?" David asked.

"Oh yeah," Scott answered. "You can't imagine how different English was a thousand years ago. Professor Baermer and I were a little unprepared. She picked it up a little faster than I did, but I eventually got it." He laughed. "We nearly got ourselves killed. Our accents made some people think we were Saxons."

"We're supposed to blend into the woodwork," David half-jokingly accused.

"We eventually did." Scott paused to see David's concerned expression. "Don't worry, Dave, nothing's been changed. You're still here, aren't you?"

"Yeah," David chuckled, "but should I be?"

The theoretical discussion was never continued, for both men became aware of the sound of approaching voices down the hall.

"Stand tall, young man," Scott said in a pompous voice. "Dr. Shanty apprroacheth!"

"Along with the techies," David added. "I guess this is it."

"Looking forward to the T.I.?" Scott asked with a smile.

"Yeah, I can't wait," David answered with deadpan sarcasm.

Scott referred to the sensation which had been given the deceptively innocuous label of Temporal Inertia. Any traveler would insist that T.I. really stood for Terror Inside. In contrast to the mild sickness felt in an accelerating space shuttle as one's internal organs are left behind a bit, in a Lorien pod, during backward acceleration in time, a traveler actually pre-dates his own internal organs by a few seconds, producing the distinct feeling that he has none. A few daredevil types claimed to enjoy it, but no-one who had ever experienced it believed them.

The door opened. Dr. Shanty walked in first. "David, Scott, you both look great!" she exclaimed as she eyed their outfits.

"Good morning, Denise," said Scott. "Thank you. We think so, too."

David chuckled at Scott's quip. Dr. Shanty's seriousness about her work yet informal attitude toward personal interaction was a dichotomy that he found endearing.

The dean now turned toward David. "Well, are you ready to join the ranks of Mythological Investigators, trekking into the unknown?" she asked with a feigned air of mystery in her voice.

"As ready as I'll ever be," he answered with a smile.

The technicians began to file in. There were five of them. It took two to carry the pod. A Lorien time pod looked very much like a twentieth century police body bag, about seven feet long, and wide enough for two adults to fit inside. It was manufactured for one trip and the return. The destination was hard-coded into internal circuitry.

While they were setting up, the dean took the time for a last minute briefing. She directed her remarks primarily to Scott. "Remember, now, the main things you're going to observe: myths regarding the 'gods', and the legends of the Great Warrior Woman."

"Xena," muttered David.

"You've been doing your homework," Dr. Shanty noted. "Yes, as near as we can make out, that's what the scrolls call her. There are conflicts, of course. Some writings depict her as a merciless warlord, others as a heroic champion of the weak. Is it all just stories? Is it two different women? We don't know. That's your job to find out, if you land in that vicinity."

That was a big "if". Landing in one's chosen time was hardly an issue when traveling back one or two hundred years. A traveler could usually land within an hour or two of his destination. However, as the descents had gotten longer, it became clear that the accuracy of the pod decreased as the length of descent increased. When Baermer and Chambers went to investigate the King Arthur legends, they landed twenty years from the time they had anticipated. New calculations had projected the margin of error for the current expedition at two to three hundred years.

Presently, the technicians announced that they were ready for descent. The pod lay open, resting on its stand, which resembled a sofa with its end lifted forty-five degrees off the ground.

"I guess this is it," David said flatly, trying to conceal nervousness. He and Scott climbed into the pod and reclined side by side. It was close quarters, but these things were unbelievably expensive to manufacture already. There was no way they would make them larger simply so travelers would have room to stretch.

"Above all, remember to just blend in," Dr. Shanty said. She grew more serious. "Don't affect anything. You understand how important that is. It becomes even more important the further back you go."

Scott's reply matched her tone. "We understand, Denise."

She continued. "The pod is designed, as usual, to search for an area of dense forest. It's unlikely that anyone will be around to see you materialise." Her voice relaxed now. "Good luck, guys. See you in a month."

A technician zipped the pod shut, hiding the two travelers from view. A loud buzzing noise grew as the equipment was brought to life. The buzz crescendoed as the pod took on a glow, then faded from view, leaving behind a shimmering ghost, which itself soon disappeared.

The dean of Mythology brushed back her bangs and stared at the empty stand for a moment, then watched as the technicians put the equipment into stand-by mode. An abandoned cup of coffee and bottle of mineral water sat on the nearby table. The technology developed fifteen years earlier by one Robert Lorien now sped two University of Chicago faculty members on the longest thrill ride ever.

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PART TWO

"Ouch!" complained Gabrielle as another tree branch scraped against her cheek. She pushed the branch aside only to find that yet another was waiting behind it to accost her forehead. "Xena, tell me again why we have to make camp *here*? I can't help thinking how nice it would be if we actually had room to stand up."

"You know how I like my privacy, Gabrielle," Xena answered. "We're so close to Theopolis, and with the festival of the gods going on, it's crawling with people around here. No-one will bother us in a thick part of the forest like this." She took another look at the bard, ducking to avoid more branches. "Don't worry," she said. "There's a small clearing just ahead. That's where we'll camp for tonight."

A few minutes later, they reached the clearing. "Well, this is more

like it," Gabrielle said as she stood straight and stretched out her arms. She looked up at the thick tangle of branches overhead. "I guess it would be too much to ask that we could see the sky."

"We'll just stay here for one night, OK?" Xena said.

"That's one night too many. But hey, it's alright," Gabrielle said with a hint of "but you owe me" in her voice. The bard liked her privacy as well, but she preferred open spaces. In very honest moments, she was forced to admit to a touch of claustrophobia.

Xena took their things from Argo's back and the two began to clear out a space for sleeping on the foliage-covered ground. Darkness was quickly falling and here, where even the light of the moon had trouble reaching, darkness would be very dark indeed.

They spread a wool blanket on a flat enough piece of ground and readied another to cover with. The air was quiet and filled with the sweet odor of greenery. It was also a little stifling as far as Gabrielle was concerned, but that mattered less and less as her weariness set in. They were both glad for a chance to sleep. They settled in to the gentle sounds of crickets and various other forms of forest fauna and anticipated drifting off. There was a slight buzzing noise nearby. "Great. A beehive. That's all we need," remarked Gabrielle.

"Just leave them alone and they'll leave you alone," Xena said.

"Don't you know that's just a myth?" replied the bard.

The buzz grew louder -- louder than a hive a bees should have sounded. Argo made a disturbed noise. Xena sat up and looked in the direction of the buzz. "Gabrielle," she said.

"What is it?" Gabrielle questioned, annoyed and still wishing she could fall asleep. She looked at Xena and saw by the faint, disrupted light of the moon that her eyes were fixed and noticed that her face seemed lit by another source. Her gaze followed Xena's. About fifteen feet away, where the buzzing was coming from, and it was now quite loud, there was a shimmering on the ground -- enough to light up their little clearing a bit. Argo was growing increasingly restless.

The glow and the sound began to fade as a large object began to take shape, which itself carried its own faint glow. As the object became more solid, the two women were as unable to recognise it as they were the formless shining. It seemed to resemble a giant placenta, about seven feet long and four feet wide.

Xena and Gabrielle just stared for a while, but when it began to writhe slightly, they stood and Xena's hand went instinctively to her chakram. Her grip tightened when the placenta began to open and slowly, two figures sat up from the inside. Presently, Xena could see that the figures were two grown men. They spoke softly to each other in a language the women didn't understand, which surprised Xena a bit. She had been exposed to countless languages and was fluent in several but this language sounded like nothing she had ever heard before.

The men stood and Argo made another sound, which seemed to startle them. They noticed the horse, then a split second later, saw the two women. They uttered a few excited syllables. They apparently were not expecting to see anyone, and were clearly not pleased by the turn of events.

The warrior and the bard continued cautiously watching as the two strangers continued to speak nervously to each other in the unknown language. "Xena, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Gabrielle whispered.

"What are you thinking?" was Xena's reply.

After a moment, Gabrielle said, "I think we've just witnessed the birth of gods."

"That's possible," Xena said thoughtfully. "Whatever it was, I get the feeling we weren't supposed to see it."

Now Gabrielle noticed that the two men were looking at them, as if wondering how to handle the situation. "I don't like this at all," she said, not taking her eyes off the men. She took a quick glance at the chakram with Xena's hand wrapped around it. "Sic 'em, Xena!" she said quickly.

"Gabrielle, you don't just 'sic' gods, if that's what they are," Xena chided. "Especially gods you don't know. There's a difference between courage and foolishness, and that would be just plain foolish."

Gabrielle sighed. "Where's Joxer when you need him?" she lamented.

"Let's just try to find out more before we jump to conclusions," Xena said as she relaxed her grip on the chakram. Then she added, "but be careful."

Xena began slow, cautious steps toward the men, never taking her eyes off of them. As she walked, she re-hung the chakram on her belt, and extended her hands, palms outward, in front of her. The taller of the two men mirrored the gesture of peace, followed by his companion. Soon, Xena and the taller man were close enough to focus into each other's eyes. It seemed that these two meant no harm. Just the same, she kept her arm tensed and her attention focused in case fighting should suddenly become necessary.

"Who...are you?" she asked, slowly and deliberately, hoping the strangers understood some Greek.

The men looked at each other with confused expressions. Xena assumed they did not understand and was beginning to try and think of a way to communicate with them, when the shorter, sandy-haired one broke the silence.

"We...are..." he began clumsily.

"Are you gods?" Gabrielle asked as she started to step forward. Xena shot her an admonishing glance.

"Yes, yes, gods," the tall man piped in. "That is what...we are." The shorter one looked at him as if surprised.

Xena turned to Gabrielle. "I wanted to hear their answer, with no 'coaching' from us," she whispered.

"Sorry Xena, but what else could they be?" the bard asked, staying focused on the shorter man, whom she now noticed was quite handsome. Aren't most gods?, she thought. "What are your names?" she asked them.

The short one spoke. "I am David. He is Scott."

There was a brief silence. "David," Xena whispered to Gabrielle. "That's an Israelite name, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Gabrielle replied. "But Israel is into that One God thing. Why would this kind of god have an Israelite name?" She paused for a moment. "And I've never heard a name like 'Scott'."

"Not only that," Xena continued. "I've never heard of a god so clumsy with Greek before."

She turned her attention back to the men and approached closer, her hands still extended. Scott followed suit, walking slowly forward until the two were close enough to touch. He turned his palms upward and Xena put her hands on top of his, clasping them. He looked into her eyes and smiled disarmingly, and she did the same as she took a step closer.

In an instant, her hands were no longer holding his, but had found just the right spots on his throat. With the sudden smack of flesh against flesh, Scott was on his knees.

Xena was about to direct her comments to Scott, but as David rushed forward to aid him, she decided to address David. She spoke calmly, but rapidly. "I've cut off the flow of blood to your friend's brain. He'll die in sixty seconds unless you tell me the truth about who you are."

"Alright, alright, I will tell you!" David said desperately, speaking as quickly as he could, but still obviously fumbling with the language. "We are not gods."

"That's a good start," Xena said, folding her arms.

"We are ... travelers," David continued, the pitch of his voice rising. "Travelers from your ... future."

Xena's arms remained folded. She said nothing. Her piercing stare remained fixed on David.

"It is true! Please!" he begged. He looked toward Gabrielle, who was now standing at Xena's side. "Please!"

Gabrielle looked into his eyes. There was something there -- something that didn't fit. Sure, his "travelers from the future" line sounded twice as fishy as the story about being gods. But if he were continuing to deceive, and indeed meant them some kind of harm, he wouldn't be the type to be so honestly desperate about the life of

another. And that was what his eyes told her -- that all bets were off if only his friend could live.

She touched Xena's arm and spoke softly. "Xena... I don't know what he means, but I don't think he's lying."

Xena cocked an eyebrow. She saw Gabrielle's eyes fixed on David's and wondered if perhaps the passions of youth were clouding the bard's judgment. But she also did not wish to kill and, seeing that the men were unarmed, she decided that for the moment, she and Gabrielle could handle any tricks they might attempt.

With a lightning-quick motion, Xena released Scott and he slumped to the ground in relief. "We'll hear you out ... for now," she said.

After hearing their fantastic story, Gabrielle almost wondered if she had been wrong to plead their case with Xena in the first place. But she knew she wasn't, for she could not escape David's eyes. They spoke not of innocence, for innocence is involuntary. Rather, they spoke of chosen honesty.

Neither could David escape her eyes, and of this he was frightened. Not only were they excruciatingly beautiful, but they seemed to be a window to a soul so deep in its integrity, he could barely fathom it. He wondered how much he should trust his own trust in her. He knew he would tell this young woman truth -- even truth she should not hear -- with little thought to the consequences.

"So you're telling us that neither of you is actually to be born for another three thousand years?" Gabrielle asked, her mind reeling with the concept.

"That is right," David answered.

"So then, everything that will happen, a thousand, two thousand years from now, has already happened?"

"Not exactly. It has happened for us, it has not for you."

"This all sounds like a lot of double-talk," Xena said suspiciously. "But if it's true, it would explain how you just materialised out of nowhere."

"We are sorry about that," Scott said sadly. "You were not supposed to observe our appearance. That was an accident. And you are correct. There is no reason you should understand or believe these things." After a pause he said, "But whether you believe them or not, it is most important that you tell no-one. We beg you."

Xena looked at Scott for a long moment. Throughout her life, she had had to develop sharp skills of character judgment, though she was often in the habit of first assuming the worst. It was usually safer that way. But now she could see why Gabrielle had intervened before. Both men had the look of persons with nothing to hide -- a look of well-worn sincerity.

"Why is it so important that we keep it a secret?" she asked.

"It's important that we leave things as they are," Scott said, beginning to feel more comfortable with the language. "We wouldn't have told you who we were, except that you saw us arrive, and, well, you threatened our lives."

"Sorry about that," said Xena, eyes shifting, "but I didn't have much choice. I don't know what it's like in your time, but here and now, you have to watch your back all the time."

Scott said, "I understand. I'm sorry I said we were gods. We didn't expect to see anyone right away and it was the only thing I could think of."

Xena looked at her companion. "Yeah, thanks to Gabrielle," she said. The bard looked annoyed at the mention of her faux pax.

"Gabrielle. That's a beautiful name," said David. She smiled and looked nervously toward her feet. David turned to the warrior. "I do not... don't," he corrected himself, "I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

"I'm Xena," she said.

Upon hearing her name, the two men's eyes widened and they looked at each other incredulously. When they looked back at Xena, there was a healthy dose of fear in their stare.

"You're Xena?" Scott said.

"The same Xena called The Great Warrior Woman?" David chimed in.

"I've been called a lot of things," Xena said. Now it was she who was incredulous. "You've heard of me? Three thousand years from now?"

"Um... sketchy tales," Scott answered. "What remains of ancient writings." Both he and David were tense now, shifting as they sat.

Gabrielle looked at them for a moment. She could tell that something had changed. "What's the matter with you two?" she finally asked.

"Well," David began, then looked at Xena, "some of the stories depict you as... well... rather..."

"Ruthless," Scott interjected. "Angry, even murderous." They both now looked as if they were ready at any moment to fight, or run, for their lives.

Xena and Gabrielle smiled at each other and at the inside joke. Xena's smile contained a hint of regret and Gabrielle's an equal portion of compassion. The two then turned toward the men. "Don't worry," Xena said. "Those stories are part of *my* past."

"Haven't you read anything about her mighty good deeds?" Gabrielle asked.

"Yes," David said, calmer now, "but we hardly could know which to believe."

"Believe those," she said. "Those stories are the real Xena." She looked at the warrior with admiration. Xena stared into the darkness, trying to deny a determined tear its right to exist.

Scott was watching her, then instinctively realised she would rather he didn't. "You two were about to get some sleep when we ... interrupted," he said. "David and I had better get going and find a place to wait the night out."

Xena woke from her reverie. "Wait," she said, and the two men obeyed. "It's not safe to wander around out here in the middle of the night, especially if you don't know where you're going. You'd better stay here."

David and Scott looked at each other. "That's very kind of you," Scott said. "We'll just sleep right over here." They staked out a spot about ten feet away from the women.

"Yes, you will," Xena replied, somewhat sternly. David and Gabrielle caught each other's eye inadvertently and smiled.

They all reclined, each on his or her own piece of the earth. The air was perfect -- no coverings were required. Four travelers, each from a different place and time, some not completely sure whether they should trust each other, all tired of distrust, closed their eyes and succumbed to the touch of Morpheus.

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PART THREE

David woke with a terrible start to the smell of pan bread cooking. He quickly looked around, as if in fear, then tentatively relaxed, having remembered where he was.

"What's the matter?" Gabrielle asked as she tended to the frying dough. "Having a bad dream?"

"I ... I dreamed that ..." he faltered, still coming to terms with the fact that it had been a dream. "I dreamed I went back to my own time ... and everything was all different. The world was this horribly dark place. And ... I found out that everyone was under the power of some ruthless world dictator. And then I saw the dictator. And ..."

"Let me guess," she said wearily. "It was Xena."

"No," David replied. "The face was ... my own face. I mean, he looked just like me."

He watched as Gabrielle skillfully kneaded more dough for the pan. Breakfast, he now noticed, smelled wonderful. The scent was quickly removing the chill from his spine that the dream had caused. "In times not long before mine," he mused, "one of the most valuable traits in a woman was considered to be her cooking ability. Men always talked about wanting to marry a good cook."

"It's not much different now," Gabrielle replied. "Is it different in your time?"

David thought for a moment, then laughed, "Not really. It's just that nobody says it out loud." Gabrielle laughed too, and the sparkle in her emerald eyes made him forget his fears, dream-induced or otherwise. There was enough light squeezing its way through the trees to show him that her beauty, as he had noticed it the night before, was little more than a shadow of the true picture.

"What other reasons do people get married in your time?" she asked.

"Well," he answered, "just like any time, probably -- sometimes they see something in each other that they just can't define. But it's so wonderful that they never want to take their eyes off each other."

"Hmm," answered Gabrielle absently. A few seconds of silence later, she looked up from the dough to notice that David had been staring at her, smiling. "Cut it out," she laughed, then looked away, though she could scarcely conceal the attraction she felt toward him. "Is there more to your name than David?" she asked.

"My name is David Gold," he said.

It fits, she thought as she noticed his golden hair shining in the sparse sunlight. Now it was she who found herself staring.

Xena sat up suddenly, startling Gabrielle from her reverie. "Am I the only one around here who wakes up calmly?" Gabrielle asked indignantly.

"Sorry," Xena said. "I'm not used to waking up to the sound of voices lately -- unless I'm being attacked."

"It's alright," the bard waved her off. "Breakfast is almost ready."

"We'd better wake Scott," remarked Xena.

"No need," came the voice of a man stretching. "I'm here." Scott rubbed his eyes. He stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of the warrior, who was standing now. She was statuesque, and even having just awakened, breathtaking. The contrast between her dark flowing tresses, alabaster skin, and deep azure eyes was one that he found difficult to look away from. But there was more than that. In those eyes was a melding of strength and softness such as he had never seen before, or even imagined could exist.

"Paint a portrait," she said. "It lasts longer."

"But it's not nearly as ..." he began, but stopped short. It was

difficult to resist commenting on her beauty, but he wasn't sure she was the type who would appreciate flirtatious small talk. He suddenly felt self-conscious. To his relief, Gabrielle announced that it was time to eat.

Though the pan bread was a staple for the warrior and the bard, the ersatz gods could not remember ever tasting anything so good. They eagerly devoured more than their share.

After breakfast, as the four were cooperating in clean-up efforts, Gabrielle brought up the festival of the gods in nearby Theopolis. "I love those festivals," she said to David. "There are a million things going on at once. It's so much fun."

Scott overheard and piped up, "That does sound like fun." Then to David, "There's probably an awful lot of valuable information there, too. About the culture, I mean."

"Yes, I'm sure there is," said David. "Can I talk to you a minute, Scott?" Scott looked a little bewildered as David took him aside. "Listen, don't you have to check over the pod or something? I'd really like to spend some time with Gabrielle."

"What are you talking about?" asked Scott nervously. "You can't get ... involved with her. You're in danger of becoming a part of history!"

"I know, I know!" David whispered. "I'll watch myself. But I just ... need to spend time with her. Have you ever felt like that about anyone?"

"Sure I have, but ..." Scott began.

"Well, I haven't," finished David, "until now. Trust me on this, Scott. Look, I'll be sure to get all the information I can from the festival, OK?"

"Your mind will be on the festival?" Scott asked cynically.

"I'm a historian, just like you," David answered almost angrily. "I can do my job. It's just that I can't pass up a chance to ... I don't even know. I just know I want to be with her -- to know her."

"Alright," Scott sighed. "But do you actually expect me to be able to stop Xena from going?"

"You may not have to," David said, looking in the direction of the two women and eavesdropping on their conversation as he began to make his way toward the far end of the clearing.

"Don't you have to groom Argo or something?" Gabrielle was saying. "Come on, Xena. You're not that crazy about these festivals anyway."

"That's not the point," argued Xena.

"Then what is the point?" asked Gabrielle, her fists on her hips.

The warrior princess hesitated. "Never mind," she said, turning away. "You go ahead."

"Xena," Gabrielle pleaded, dropping her confronting stance, aware that her friend was hurt.

"You wanted me to stay, I'm staying," Xena said, with little emotion. Then she added, "I'll still be here when you get back."

The bard looked at her for a moment, then slowly turned away, moving toward David. As she and David headed in the direction of the shore, she took one more look back, then was gone.

"Kids," said Scott with dismay.

"What?" Xena said, suddenly remembering that she was not alone.

"Those two," Scott replied. "I guess some things don't change no matter how many centuries go by."

"Uh huh," Xena grunted. The ironies of history held little interest for her at the moment. "So do you have to do something with that ... machine thing of yours?"

"I suppose I should check the tether generator," he said. Then in response to her questioning squint, "Come on, I'll try to explain how it works."

Xena shrugged and began to approach the pod. She supposed it would do her good to have something to occupy her mind right now. As she walked, she could feel Scott's gaze upon her and it made her uncomfortable.

"There's not much to see, visually speaking," Scott said, then quickly glancing at the warrior's long legs, "about the pod, I mean."

Xena rolled her eyes.

"There's all kinds of stuff to make it work tucked inside the walls," Scott continued. "But one of the most important parts is this," he said as he pushed open the pod to reveal a small silver box. "The man who invented this machine discovered that each of us is held to our own time by a kind of invisible string. He called it a tether because he found out it had some 'slack' in it."

"What does *that* mean?" Xena asked.

"It means we can go into the past and keep the tether attached. But we need this to do it," he said, pointing to the box. "It keeps us attached to our time. Just a little, we can actually feel it holding us ... right about here." He pointed to near his navel. "If it gets turned off, the tether to our own time will be broken, and this time, here and now, will grab us. The natural tether to this time is stronger than our artificial one and it can't be broken. We'd never be able to re-attach to our own time. We'd be here to stay for the rest of our lives."

"How does it get turned off?" the warrior questioned.

"This pad here," Scott explained, "senses certain people's fingerprints and responds to them. Even I or David can't turn it off."

Xena thought for a moment, then wondered, "If it got turned off, why couldn't you just go to your own time, then break the tether to this time?"

"You're picking this up quite well," Scott observed, raising his eyebrows. "The simple answer to that is that tethers can't extend forward. Nothing can go into its own future. So once we got stuck here, we could never go back. This would be our home." He paused for a moment, looking at the pod. "So you couldn't, say, come back with me -- which is too bad."

Xena didn't ask why it was too bad, but Scott seemed to pretend she did.

"Because it's pretty cramped in there," he said, then turned to look at her. "It would be a lot more pleasant ride with you than with David," he grinned.

"Scott, listen," Xena said with a soft but serious expression, "you seem to be ... I just need you to understand that I'm not interested, OK?"

Scott was only slightly stunned by her bluntness. "OK," he said, trying to hide his disappointment.

After a few seconds, Xena said, "Why don't we go and gather some more wood for a fire tonight."

"Sounds good," said Scott, and began to follow after her.

She stopped for a moment. "And Scott," she said in a warning tone, and when his eyes acknowledged her, "I won't tell you nicely again."

He smiled and bowed his head slightly. All at once, he realised that he had never in his life respected anyone as much as he did this enigmatic warrior.

"Xena," he began, "I'm kind of glad that you and Gabrielle saw us arrive. It's good to have someone in this time we can talk to directly. It makes it easier to get information." He paused. "And ..."

"And what?" Xena asked suspiciously.

He looked straight at her. "It's good to have a friend here," he said.

The warrior's brow relaxed and a slight smile crossed her lips. "Come on, let's go," she said, and the two disappeared into the woods.

Near the pod, there was a rustling of branches and a sleek figure emerged into the clearing, tossing back a lush mop of platinum blonde hair. "How neat!" she cooed. "So the WP's got herself visitors from

the future." The goddess of love eagerly inspected the pod. "And the tall one's such a good teacher."

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART FOUR

The sun shone from high in a cloudless sky as Gabrielle and David continued their trek to Theopolis. With every step, their feet sank into the white sand of the beach, making their legs ache.

"Maybe we should walk closer to the water," David suggested. "The sand will be firmer there."

"Good idea," agreed Gabrielle. "Why didn't you think of it earlier?"

"I'm not the only one with a brain here," he teased. "Or is being a 'sidekick' the only thing you're cut out for?"

"I'll have you know I'm a bard," she countered with a laugh. "A writer and storyteller. I can have everyone in a tavern on the edge of their seats like that," she said with a snap of her fingers.

"Really," he said, and now the teasing left his voice. "What kinds of things do you write about?"

"Oh, anything that's interesting," she replied. "Like, I write about different people's heroic exploits, especially Xena's. Or I write stories about the gods. Those are interesting to a lot of people. The gods can be pretty colourful."

"You talk as if you actually believe the gods exist," said David.

Gabrielle gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean? Of course they exist. Look at the world around you. Look at the sky. Look at the beautiful sun Zeus made to shine on us today."

"But have you actually seen the gods?" David asked. "Or have you just heard and told stories of them?"

"We wouldn't mind seeing a little less of them, as a matter of fact," she said. "Most of them are pretty petty, concerned only about their own interests. Except for Hercules. Now there's an example of what a god should be. Of course, he's only half god."

David stopped walking. "Wait a minute," he said. "You mean to tell me you've actually seen Hercules? You know him personally?"

"Well, I don't know him all that well," the bard answered. "But, Xena, now that's another story. From what I've heard, she knows him

extremely well." She added with a casual smile, "Apparently, he 'unlocked her heart.'"

"Are you sure about these 'gods'?" he asked as he began to walk again. "I mean, could they be magicians or something fooling everybody?"

"Not from what I've seen," Gabrielle said. "Everybody knows of the gods. Why are you asking things like this? Are you telling me you've never encountered them?"

"Gabrielle," David said, trying to choose his words carefully, knowing this was one of those moments when he was going to tell her more than he should. "Where I come from, no-one's ever seen the gods of Olympus. And if anyone said they did, they'd be dismissed as a crackpot. Our society has for centuries assumed that they never existed -- that they were just made-up stories."

"It sounds like a terribly repressive, dark time," Gabrielle said sympathetically. "Of course, maybe it's just as well. The fear of the gods is no picnic. They're always sticking their noses in where they don't belong, and there's nothing we can do about it."

David was silent, incredulous -- then suspicious. It occurred to him that perhaps he was getting carried away. Maybe she was the most wonderful woman he had ever met, but she was still a part of this time -- and though she may be quite intelligent, she was still subject to some of the same ignorant notions as anyone else here. He would have to check out the business about these 'gods'.

"Well, there are a lot of people who believe they did exist," he went on, "but that they weren't actually gods -- they were ... visitors."

"'Visitors'? What do you mean?" the bard asked.

"Visitors, like me. Only not necessarily from the future. Maybe from another world."

"I still don't follow you," said Gabrielle.

"Another world," repeated David. "Like this one. Only far, far out in the sky where you can't even see it. They would have come here in ships that could sail tremendous distances across the sky. Like Scott and I, they would have machines and things that you wouldn't understand and so, if they wanted to, they could easily make you believe that they're gods."

"Like you tried to do?" Gabrielle said with a crooked smile.

"We were just trying to maintain a disguise. But others might have different reasons. So they could make you do what they want you to. So they could have you as toys to play with." Now David became aware of just how many beans he was spilling. In his mind's eye, he saw Gabrielle leading a revolt against the gods, armed with this new knowledge. "Gabrielle," he said, "please remember that it's very important you don't tell anyone about me and Scott, or about the things we tell you."

"I know, you've said that before," she said. "Why? Why is it such a

big deal?"

"Because we're just supposed to be finding out things," he answered. "We're not supposed to change anything. That would mess everything up. If different things happen because I was here, that can cause a cascade effect. The differences three thousand years from now could be unimaginable."

"Your dream," she said. "You dreamed of a scary, dark world that was completely different from your home. You're afraid you'll cause change, and it will be bad."

"I guess so," he answered thoughtfully. "Time seems so fragile. Sometimes I wonder if we should be doing this at all."

"Nonsense," argued Gabrielle. "If you'd never come here, you'd never have met me. And you'd be much worse off for it," she said as she playfully poked him in the chest.

David's face relaxed into a smile. "I'll go along with that," he said, and the two continued on toward Theopolis, which was now only about a half mile away.

"That ought to build a good fire," Scott said as he set down his pile of wood on top of Xena's. He slapped his hands together a few times to get the bits of bark off. "Nice, dry wood."

"We've got to be careful not to let the fire get too big," said Xena. "If it gets out of control, we could have a forest fire on our hands."

"Only you can prevent them," Scott said offhandedly.

"What do you mean by that?" Xena asked.

"Oh, oh, nothing," Scott stammered. "Just an expression I've heard. What's for dinner?"

"Gabrielle usually handles that," the warrior answered, then added with mock bitterness, "but we can't ask her. She's busy."

Scott glanced at her sideways and smiled sympathetically. "You're pretty used to having her around, aren't you?"

"She's very special," Xena sighed. "But obviously, I'm not the only one who thinks so."

"She'll be OK with Dave," Scott tried to assure her. "He's a caring, down to earth guy."

The warrior looked off into the distance. "Beautiful," she muttered to herself. Scott looked at her, puzzled.

All at once, the relative silence was shattered by the sound of a thunderclap that seemed for all the world to have occurred just a few feet away. "What the ... that's strange," Scott remarked. "There's not a cloud in the ..."

He stopped upon seeing Xena's determined stare. He followed the direction of her gaze and saw a man standing at the edge of the clearing dressed in a worn leather shirt with no sleeves. About his waist was a girth of armour. He was not an extremely large man, but Scott had never seen anyone quite so solidly built. He exuded a somewhat frightening air of arrogance and power.

"Hello, Ares," Xena said with a slight sneer. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, Xena," replied the god with mock congeniality. "I would think you'd be happy to see me. You and I have meant so much to each other in the past."

Xena silently folded her arms.

"Ah, Xena," said Ares as he walked closer. "Your arms say 'no no', but your eyes ..." he leaned in to look more closely at her face. "Well, your eyes say 'no no', too. But I know there's 'yes yes' somewhere in that warrior's heart of yours."

"Xena, what's going on?" Scott finally asked. His instinct was to try and protect her from whoever this was, though he knew that would not be necessary, let alone possible.

"Nothing, Scott," the warrior replied, never turning her gaze from Ares. "I can handle this."

"I see you have company," Ares said, noticing Scott for the first time. "Maybe I should go and come back another time."

"He's just a friend," Xena said. "But maybe you should go and *not* come back another time."

Ares now turned to Scott. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said with a nonchalance that seemed somehow threatening. "I'm Ares, god of war."

"I'll ask you again, Ares," Xena said, not waiting for a reply from Scott. "What are you doing here?"

The god of war turned back toward the warrior. "Opportunities, Xena," he said, stepping still closer to her. "New opportunities left and right for you and I to join forces once again. And I'm thinking of it especially now. The festival of the gods is a great time for new beginnings, don't you think? Leaving behind the mistakes of the past, moving on into the future."

"I've been trying to do that for a long time," Xena said. "Trying to live down the reputation I gained while I was working with you."

"You've got it backwards," said Ares. "Leaving my side was the mistake. That miserable half-breed excuse for a god poisoned your mind. Listening to Hercules, that was where you went wrong. But you can leave that behind you now and join me. I'm forgiving, I'll take you back." He reached out and gently caressed her shoulders. "We were an unstoppable team, Xena."

Xena looked at her shoulder, her eyes following Ares' strong hand as

it slowly traced the curve. Her face slowly turned to meet his piercing gaze. Gods he's handsome, she thought, but she stopped herself before her eyes gave away the maybes that flashed, if only for a moment, through her thoughts.

"Sorry, Ares," she said flatly. "You may never change, but I have."

"Of course," Ares sarcastically droned. "You work to help people now. You prevent wars instead of starting them. You've been far too influenced by that blonde bubblehead you pal around with."

He took his hands from her shoulders and she felt a slight sense of loss -- a feeling which she could scarcely even admit to herself.

"By the way," Ares continued, "where is the little trollop? I just noticed how quiet it's been since I got here."

"It's really none of your business where Gabrielle is," Xena said. "Maybe she just disappeared." And now she glared pointedly at him. "Maybe you should, too."

Ares folded his arms. "Maybe I'll go find her," he said. "Maybe I can persuade her to talk some sense into you." And with that, the god of war silently disappeared in a brilliant flash of light.

Xena raised an eyebrow and slowly turned in the direction of Argo. As she passed a motionless Scott, she stopped and, lifting a finger to his chin, gently shut his slackened jaw. "Flies will get in," she said, and continued on, more intently now, toward the mare.

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART FIVE

A small crowd of onlookers backed away with fascinated caution as flames shot from the mouth of the fire eater. "Just call me 'the god of fire'!" he declared to laughter and applause.

A short distance away, Gabrielle said to David, "I've seen Xena use that trick a dozen times." The two turned and walked in another direction. "In fact, she kind of over-uses it," she mused. "Just a little."

The bard looked around in delight, seeing that this day had everything she loved about festivals, and more. It was not surprising. Various towns had various feasts and parties honouring individual gods, but little rivaled the Theopolis Festival of the Gods, an all-in-one celebration of the love-hate relationship between mortals and the residents of Mount Olympus. The streets were filled with jugglers, merchants, magicians, daredevils of every kind ... and storytellers. Gabrielle usually managed to, if only for a time,

become a part of the hubbub herself. She would often find a tavern which was, for the moment, quiet, and would have no difficulty in gathering patrons around her and engrossing them in some tale of adventure or other. Perhaps today she would too, for she longed for David to see her in action. Maybe later, she thought. For now, it was time to simply enjoy the festivities, and her company.

"What's with that guy over there?" David asked, pointing to a man dressed in blue from head to foot.

Gabrielle began, "He's dressed as Poseidon, god of ..."

"The sea," David finished, his eyes still fixed on the costumed man.

"I guess you've heard of him," said Gabrielle. "He's one of the more petty, mean-spirited gods." The two walked closer. "Look, he's selling little replicas of Poseidon. At a tidy profit, no doubt."

"I wouldn't mind getting something to eat," David said, suddenly noticing that, thanks to the long walk, the satisfying effect of the pan bread had finally worn off.

"You should have no trouble finding something," Gabrielle replied. "I don't suppose you brought any dinars with you."

David pulled a few coins from his pouch and showed them to her. "Are you talking about these?" he asked.

"You did bring money," she said. "That's strange. I mean that money hasn't changed in all that time."

"Actually, it certainly has," replied David. "We didn't really bring much. We weren't supposed to be wealthy. We just needed enough to buy food and maybe shelter. Ancient money like this is far too valuable in my time to allow Scott and I to take a big pile of it."

"Well, you'll easily be able to fill your stomach here," Gabrielle said, waving her hand about her. "You might even find something that's almost as good as my cooking."

David smiled broadly. He was having the time of his life, and it wasn't because of the entertainment or the plethora of culinary delights or the grand opportunities for cultural research. He appreciated all those things, of course, but the real pleasure was in being with Gabrielle. He surmised that having her by his side would make even a season in Hades' domain seem like a stroll through paradise.

Their process of deciding just how to begin their midday meal was cut short by a flash of light behind them, which was strangely noticeable even in the bright sunlight, accompanied by the brief, but intense sound of a rushing wind. They, along with the rest of the nearby crowd, turned to see an imposing, leather-clad figure standing in an open area, surrounded by an entourage of rag-tag warriors.

"Ares," breathed Gabrielle.

"So he's dressed as the god of war," muttered David. "What other gods

do people ..."

Gabrielle cut him off. "No, David. That **is** Ares," she whispered. "The gods do occasionally visit these festivals, but not very often. What's he doing here?"

"What?" said David in a normal voice which, he noticed, was quite audible over the hush of the crowd. Gabrielle gestured to him to lower his voice and he continued in a whisper. "You mean to tell me this is actually one of your 'gods'?"

"Yes," she answered. "That's Ares -- god of war."

David looked at Ares for a moment. "You're sure of this? You've seen him before?"

"Yes, of course I've ..." she began, but stopped when she noticed that Ares was looking in her direction.

The god, his cronies behind him and his eyes fixed on Gabrielle, began to walk toward them slowly. David suddenly found himself consumed with the excitement of discovery, that superseded any fear that might have threatened to paralyze him. He slowly strode out to meet Ares, staring with both amazement and suspicion.

"David! What are you doing?" Gabrielle whispered loudly while taking his arm in an effort to stop him.

"Don't worry, Gabrielle," he said. "I just want to talk to him."

Giving him a confused look, the bard let go of his arm, and he continued walking.

When David and Ares came to within a few feet of each other, Ares suddenly noticed that something was blocking his path to Gabrielle. He looked down into the eyes of the time traveler.

"Who are you?" Ares demanded, disdain and annoyance written all over his face.

"The question is, who are you?" David said as he curiously looked the war god over.

"I think you should get out of my way," Ares said, "while I still consider you trivial enough to allow you to live."

"Ares, god of war," David said with a slight smile. "Or would you prefer that I call you ... Mars?"

Ares paused for a moment, curiosity now replacing annoyance in his eyes. "You're obviously a well-traveled man," he finally said.

Gabrielle, who was within earshot, quickly strode forward. "You have no idea," she said with a mischievous smile. David gave her a warning look, but his eyes betrayed the fact that he was pleased by her admiration.

Ares' attention now turned back to the bard. "I don't have time for

this," he said. "I've come here for one reason." He nodded to his henchmen, and before she had time to raise her staff in defense, they had closed in around Gabrielle, taken her by both arms, and taken the staff.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, struggling for her freedom.

"I just wanted your attention," Ares answered, walking slowly toward her. "I want you to convince Xena of where her true destiny lies. In other words, to undo all the damage you've done."

"Xena is on the path of her destiny," Gabrielle replied. "The path of redemption, of using her strength to help people."

"Now, see?" said Ares, gesturing toward her with exasperation. "You've been feeding her just that kind of garbage for way too long now. Mr. goody-god Hercules started all this, and you just keep the ball rolling."

"I won't tell Xena she should join you, Ares," retorted Gabrielle. "She'd never believe I really meant it anyway."

"Yeah, yeah," Ares droned, making the shape of an opening and closing beak with his hand. "I knew you'd say something like that. Although, I am surprised you said it in so few words. Anyway, maybe just the fact that I have you will be good enough to convince her."

"She won't join you," Gabrielle said with a bitter laugh, "she'll hate you."

"There are a lot of different roads to Xena's destiny with me," Ares replied. "If I can help her experience true hatred again, that's as much of a good start as anything."

David, seeing the captivity of Gabrielle, had been filling with a hatred of his own, and chose that moment to attempt to lunge at Ares. Two of the warriors, who were not occupied with Gabrielle, wrestled him to the ground with a thud.

Ares, distracted by the noise, turned in the direction of the men and breathed an exasperated sigh. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"He tried to come at you, Lord Ares," one of the warriors answered.

"And you think I need you to protect me?" Ares asked rhetorically. He looked at David for a moment. "Stand up," he finally said.

David stood and brushed himself off, never taking steely eyes off of Ares.

"It takes both guts and stupidity to try to tackle the god of war," observed Ares. "It's very sweet and all that you wanted to protect your girlfriend. I'm sure she's touched. But as I said before, I've got business to take care of, and my patience with you is running out very, very quickly."

David took a step closer to the god, staring intently into his eyes. He was still slightly out of breath. "I know what you are, Ares," he said softly, but with conviction. "I know what you all are."

Ares raised an eyebrow, then narrowed his gaze. He looked directly at David for a long moment. Then he said in a very low voice, "Let her go."

The warriors holding Gabrielle looked at each other with confused expressions. "My lord?" one of them said.

Ares looked quickly in their direction. "I said, let her go!" he commanded.

The henchmen complied. Gabrielle shook and flexed her arms. "That's better," she said, though she had to admit to some confusion herself.

Ares pointed at David and after a pause, said, "Kill him instead."

David started to run in Gabrielle's direction, hoping that the two of them would be able to escape. But one of the goons stuck out a foot and tripped him, causing him to fall into the arms of one of the others. The warriors were excited now. They had hoped they'd be able to kill someone. Their excitement was spreading and the hush of the crowd was rapidly evolving into a roar.

Gabrielle took advantage of the confusion to retrieve her staff from its captor. She hit him in the knees from the front, ensuring that he would be unable to join the fray for quite some time. The one that held David, she hit in the spine, causing him to let go, then directly over the head, causing him not to take hold again.

David, now free, whirled on the one who had tripped him and punched him squarely in the jaw. It was a well-landed punch, but unfortunately, had little effect on the seasoned warrior. The warrior seized David by the throat with his left hand and drew a sword with his right. Gabrielle was continuing to hold her own with the others, but was far too busy in that pursuit to help David. The warrior raised the sword high and prepared to bring it down upon David's neck.

The warrior felt a sudden jolt upon the sword, after which it felt much lighter. When he examined it, only the merest stub of a blade remained. He looked around for an answer. His confusion ended as he saw the chakram returning to Xena's hand. The milieu again grew silent.

He knew her well, as did all but the greenest of warriors. They had all either worked with or against her at one time or another. "Xena!" he called out with a confident laugh. "How do you catch that thing without cutting those lovely hands to ribbons?"

"It's all in the wrist," she shouted back. "Here, try it!" She hurled the deadly circle in his direction. A look of panic materialised on his face as he frantically ducked. He could swear it plucked one of his hairs as it whizzed by. It ricocheted off two trees, after which it headed back in Xena's direction and was adeptly intercepted by the hand of Ares.

Xena raised an eyebrow. "I figured I'd find you here," she said to the war god.

"Please don't play with my men, Xena," he said to her. "Unless, of course, you want to join them. Then you can play with them all you want."

"You leave my friends alone and I'll leave yours alone," she calmly replied.

Ares paused for a moment. "You're a very lucky woman," he said, throwing the chakram back with blinding speed toward Xena, who caught it with a sneer and a flick of her wrist. Putting his hand to his chest, he continued, "There aren't many for whom the god of war has a soft spot. But hear me, Xena. I'd watch out for that guy if I were you." He pointed toward David. "He's way too big for his britches. And I hope you know he's got his eye on Blondie." He approached the warrior princess and gently touched her face. "I'd hate to see you lose everything."

"Don't you have an argument to start someplace?" Xena said, using contempt to hide from herself feelings she knew were better suppressed.

Ares glared at her, and without flinching, stepped back, and silently disappeared in a flash of light.

Xena looked around at the warriors who were now temporarily without a purpose. They all looked at her, fearing what she might do next. "Boo!" she blurted out, and they all scattered with lightning speed. She smiled cynically. The crowd, though fascinated by the events, were fickle, and soon returned to their previous level of milling about.

David walked up to Xena. "Thank you. You...uh...saved my life."

"Come on, let's go," was her reply, as she mounted Argo. She looked around from atop the horse. "I just got here and I'm tired of it already."

David then noticed Scott standing a few paces away, staring catatonically at nothing in particular. Even David could see the irony as he, who had just had a brush with death, walked up to Scott and asked "Are you OK?"

Scott continued looking into the distance as he answered. "I said, 'Can I come along?' She said, 'OK, hop on, but it'll be a rough ride.' We must have done a hundred miles an hour." He turned to look wide-eyed at David. "On a horse!"

"Let's go, old man," David chuckled. "You'll be alright." Scott stumbled a bit as he began to walk, but it wasn't long before he and the others were on the road, headed for camp.

Argo carried Xena as she led the band of four from the rear. Gabrielle kept pace near Argo's nose and the time travelers walked in front, under Xena's watchful eye.

"So ... the gods," began Scott, speaking softly to David.

"Seems that they're ... uh ... real," continued David.

"Yeah," Scott conceded. "I don't think either of us expected that."

"It makes you think, you know," David said. "Like we've been looking at ancient writings all wrong. Anything we run across that we don't understand, we dismiss as fiction. We try to make everything fit our view of the world."

"Yeah," said Scott, "I guess that's pretty arrogant, alright."

There was a pause. Then David said, "So, are you thinking ... aliens?"

"What else?" Scott answered. "We have to gather more data, but offhand I'd say that this is going to blow everybody away. A lot of books are going straight down the tubes."

"I know some books that will be making a comeback," David said.

The two men looked at each other. "Von Daniken," they said simultaneously, and they both laughed.

At that moment, Gabrielle caught up with them and walked alongside David. "You were great back there," she said to him. Scott instinctively knew it was time for him to fall back and walk with Xena.

"What are you talking about?" David answered Gabrielle. "You, with this thing," he said as he fingered the staff. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

Gabrielle laughed and looked at the ground.

"Xena's not the only one who saved my life today," David continued. "About all I did was get myself in trouble and punch a guy, which hurt my hand more than his face."

"But the way you stood up to Ares," said the bard. "That was amazing."

"I'd just as soon not too much is made of that," David said, looking concerned.

"Why?" asked Gabrielle.

"I don't want to get to be some kind of hero," he answered. "I'm supposed to blend in." He turned to look at her. "Not be significant, remember?"

"Too late," she said with a smile.

"What do you mean, 'too late'?" David asked.

"You're already significant to me," answered the bard.

David smiled at her crookedly with narrowed eyes. He reached out and took her hand, and the two walked on, slightly less aware of their surroundings than before.

A few paces behind, Scott and Xena looked at each other. Scott rolled his eyes and made a mock gesture of sticking his finger down his throat. Xena smiled for a moment, then returned to gazing with melancholy eyes at the couple walking hand in hand.

A TIME FOR US

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PART SIX

"Okay, I want you to tell me what you think of this," Gabrielle challenged David and Scott, after a dinner of freshly caught fish. Scott and Xena had caught several whitefish earlier that afternoon and Gabrielle had easily converted the pile of sea life into a delicious meal. Xena had mused to herself that though Scott was no warrior, and his horsemanship left something to be desired, he showed a good deal of promise as a fisherman.

"What is it?" asked Scott.

"It's a kind of after-dinner drink," answered the bard/cook. "I'll show you. We take beans like this and grind them up between two flat rocks. Then we take the ground up beans and soak them in hot water for a while." She poured some hot, dark liquid from a kettle. "Then, we drink the water," she continued. "We don't have it that often. The beans are on the expensive side."

As the aroma began wafting toward David, he stared in wide-eyed disbelief. Gabrielle handed him a cup of the brew. "Coffee," he whispered reverently as he took the cup and raised it to his face, breathing deeply.

Scott chuckled softly as he watched his friend savour the miracle. Xena handed Scott an empty cup and motioned toward the kettle. "Thank you. I believe I will," he replied to her silent offer as he reached to pour himself some.

"Is it ... OK?" Gabrielle asked David after his first sip. David put down the cup, took the bard's face in his hands, and kissed her squarely and firmly on the cheek. "I'll take that as a 'yes'," she said, smiling warmly.

Scott took a sip and looked at Xena. "Don't even think about it," she said with the hint of a smile. With a look of feigned innocence on his face, Scott backed away and raised his free hand as if to show he was unarmed. Xena's smile grew slightly as she turned away.

It had been almost three weeks, twenty days to be exact, since the historians' unconventional arrival at Xena and Gabrielle's campsite. After the incident with Ares at the festival, Xena had somewhat grudgingly insisted that David and Scott stay with them, and the men had agreed, having realised the unanticipated dangers that were present. The spot that the women had planned to occupy for "one

night" had turned into a permanent home for the duration of their guests' stay.

Over the days, Xena had grown to enjoy Scott's company and even regard him as a friend. True, he was often disheveled, slept too late in the morning, and seemed to find humour in far too many things. Still, she could sense the respect he had for her, and she had come to feel that she could trust him, and it was only this trust that had allowed her to share stories of her past with him on several occasions. It was easy to feed his hunger for knowledge about the times in which she lived, but sometimes he wanted to know about her own enigmatic personal history. When she told him of her deeds as a warlord, he had sensed her sadness and regret and had chosen those moments to make no jokes, no quips.

Gabrielle and David had fallen into a pattern of taking a long walk on the beach every evening after supper. At David's request, Gabrielle would always bring one of her scrolls and read it to him by the light of the sunset. Then, when it got too dark to read, they would simply talk and enjoy being together. As the days had passed, they each found that their feelings for one another did not pass, and neither had taken the time to give those feelings a name, let alone decide what to do about them.

"What story will it be tonight?" David asked after he had finished his cup of the beverage.

"It's later than usual tonight," the bard answered. "I don't think I'll bring a scroll. There's not much light left." David indicated no objection.

They bade goodnight to Xena and Scott, knowing they would likely return to find them already asleep. Xena, as usual, said nothing, but when Scott offered a cheery "Have fun, kids," she glared at him sullenly.

"What's your problem with those two?" Scott asked Xena after the younger ones had gone. "I'm the one who should be concerned -- you know, the whole history thing."

"You wouldn't understand," she answered as she began to brush Argo's hair -- something she often did when she wanted to think.

"Try me," Scott said, a compassionate smile carved into his bearded face.

"Sorry, not this time," she said without looking at him.

Scott laid a hand on her shoulder for a moment. "OK," he said softly, and dropped the subject. If there was one thing he had learned about Xena, (and actually, there were many things), it was that when she said she didn't want to talk about something, she meant it. And he had learned it well, which was something Xena appreciated about him. They went silently about various evening chores, each taking quiet comfort in the other's presence.

The sun had completely set by the time Gabrielle and David emerged from the woods. The moon was clearly visible now, directly overhead

and quite bright, illuminating the two walking hand in hand.

"I knew an Israelite named David once," the bard was saying. She looked at David. "He looked a little like you. Do you think you may have any Israelite blood?"

"Almost all of my blood is," David answered.

"Really!" Gabrielle remarked. "Do you believe in what they call the One True God?"

"I don't believe in much that I can't see," said David.

"Hmm. So I've noticed," said the bard, remembering his skepticism about the Olympian gods.

"How did you end up meeting an Israelite?" he asked.

"Xena had to help him fight and kill one of her friends," Gabrielle sadly replied. "A giant named Goliath."

"No!" shouted David, almost laughing. "Now you're joking! It wasn't *that* David!"

"I take it you've heard that story too," she said.

"It's one of our most cherished tales, but there's no *Xena* in it," he answered, sounding a little cynical.

"I know. It took some doing, but she made sure of that."

David smiled and shook his head with amazement. "Did you know him well?" he asked.

"A little," she answered. "I thought I might get to know him better, but ..."

"Yeah?"

"Then I found out he was engaged, you know." She paused for a moment. "I hate when that happens."

David felt a sudden twinge of jealousy. To think that if circumstances had been slightly different, his own distant ancestor might own the affections of this beautiful bard. Come to think of it, if that had happened, he himself might have been a descendent of Gabrielle!

"You're not, are you?" Gabrielle asked, looking at David.

"What?" he replied nervously.

"You're not engaged or married or anything," she said with a smile.

"Oh, oh, yeah ... I mean, no! No, I'm not." He looked into her eyes and was very glad he was neither married nor her great great grandson. "And what about you?" he asked, half-joking.

"No," she said, then sadly looked straight ahead. "I was married

once, though."

"Really?" David said, sounding surprised. "What ... happened?"

"He was killed. No, he was murdered -- in cold blood in front of my eyes -- the day after our wedding."

David was silent for a long moment as he marveled at her. She was far from an innocent. She had been through so much and continued to press on, virtuous and strong. "I'm sorry, Gabrielle," he finally said, putting his arm around her shoulder. She quietly slipped hers around his waist and leaned against him. They continued walking in comfortable silence for quite some time.

"See the moon, David?" Gabrielle finally said. "I have this idea..." The bard had an insatiable hunger for truth and, knowing that David came to her with the accumulated knowledge of a hundred generations beyond hers, she often told him of her notions of how things worked and asked him how close she was. "I think the moon has something to do with the tides," she continued. "I noticed that when the moon is low on the horizon, the tide is low too. So I figure that the moon must be like a huge sponge. When it dips into the sea, it absorbs some of it, and so the tide goes out. Am I on the right track?"

"Hmm?" David said, his mind appearing to be elsewhere.

"Am I right? Does the moon cause the tides?"

"Um... yes, as a matter of fact, it does, Gabrielle."

"I knew it!" said the bard excitedly.

David always found her thirst for knowledge immensely appealing. But tonight, he didn't feel much like talking about science. Tonight, he cared little about the moon's influence upon the tides. It was enough that its bright, silvery light shone on Gabrielle, making her look like ... well, like Gabrielle. And as they walked alone on the vast beach, he could not imagine anything more appealing than that.

"Look at this, David," she said, stopping to bend down and pick up a strangely shaped flat rock. "I've never seen a stone like this. It's shaped a lot like a ... a dove. See?"

David inspected it as she showed it to him, and agreed that it indeed looked a bit like a dove.

"I'm going to keep this," said the bard. "I like the dove as a symbol."

"In my time, it symbolizes peace," David said.

"It's the same thing now," Gabrielle said, a little surprised. She held the stone between two fingers, looking at it. "You know, I like to believe that just one person can make a difference in the world. If more people thought that way, maybe things would be different. If more people would fight for peace ..." She stopped for a moment and laughed softly. "I know that sounds kind of strange -- 'fight for peace'."

"I love you, Gabrielle."

Where did *that* come from? Never mind, he knew where it came from. He did love her. He knew it. But he had not intended to tell her. He had to leave in ten days, never to see her again! What kind of relationship could they have? What was it about this woman that seemed to repeatedly make him speak without thinking first?

His contemplation was interrupted when a wonderfully soft pair of arms wrapped around his neck, and the sweetest mouth he could ever imagine tasting engulfed his in a kiss that was so deep, it left little doubt that she shared his feelings.

As they kissed, he relished her with all of his senses. Her scent, her taste, which were only equaled by the feel of her skin, her lips, her tongue, which were rivaled only by her flawless beauty, which in turn was surpassed only by the inner beauty that had been drawing him closer to her each minute since the day they met.

The kiss softly ended and they looked into each other's eyes for a long moment.

"This is where I always wake up," David said, almost in a whisper.

"What?" laughed Gabrielle as she stroked his golden hair.

"I've had this dream about you a hundred times, and I always wake up right after the kiss."

With a crooked smile, she said, "A hundred times? You've only slept about twenty nights since you've known me."

"Yeah, well," he said as they touched their faces together, "I was counting daydreams."

Gabrielle laughed a little. Then they kissed again, this time more intensely. With their arms wrapped tightly around each other, she could feel the fire of his love for her with every movement.

As he caressed her hair and her shoulders, she kissed his ear and whispered his name. She moved slowly down his face, softly caressing it with her lips, stopping for a long while at his mouth, then continuing to his other ear. As she kissed it, she whispered that she loved him. They held each other even more tightly than before.

They expressed their love in that way for a long time -- standing in the moonlight, kissing and touching each other's faces, necks, lips, hair. It was David and Gabrielle and the sand and the sea and the sky. It seemed as though the very heavens were created just for this time.

At some point, Gabrielle felt a further passion burn within her. She pulled away from his arms just slightly. With the gentle roar of the sea in her ears, she stared deeply into the loving eyes of the man who had attempted to assault the god of war to protect her. She felt overwhelmed with love, with desire, with trust. She slowly unlaced and removed her blouse. Then she reached over and began to undress him.

"Gabrielle," he said, pulling her to him. "Gabrielle ...". He made a desperate attempt to fight the flames of his own desire. "Gabrielle, wait ...".

"What is it, my love?" she sighed dreamily as she kissed his chest.

"Gabrielle ... what we're about to do ...". As he felt her body against his, he could barely manage to speak. "I ... I can't do it."

She stopped for a moment, then smiled as she brushed her midsection against him. "I think you're underestimating yourself," she said softly.

"That's not what I mean," he said with a little smile, then grew serious again. "I mean that I can't take the chance." He pulled away from her just enough to allow him to think clearly. "If you were to bear my child, it could be disastrous."

She gave him a puzzled look.

"Don't you see?" he continued. "I could go back to a world filled with thousands of my own descendants. Who can tell the enormous changes that could mean?"

A look of realisation slowly came to Gabrielle's face. "Now I really know what your dream meant," she said. "You saw your own face, your own descendant, as a world dictator. You were imagining the worst that could happen."

David nodded. "Yes, that my own children would ruin everything."

She again looked into his eyes and saw even more strength than she had seen before. If his desire were anything like hers at this moment, to deny it must have been no easy task. She wanted him now more than ever.

"My golden David," she said with an understanding look. She pulled him close and kissed his ear and, stroking his hair roughly, whispered, "There's more than one way to skin a cat."

Though neither of them had the slightest interest in feline pelts, they did go on to prove that there was also more than one way for two lovers to enjoy each other.

For the rest of the night, everything seemed meaningless to the traveler and the bard, except each other. No touch, no caress, no kiss seemed to be enough to completely express their love or fulfill their desire. Each new contact was like a new taste of paradise, serving only to make them hungry for more. Their love was a fiery chariot that not even the gods themselves could hope to stop. They took each other over the edge of ecstasy several times, their sweet groans of pleasure gently mingling with the relentless whispers of the Aegean Sea.

Finally, they lay together in the sand in a half-sleeping embrace, sharing a light kiss occasionally. David lay on his back, holding

Gabrielle while she rested her head on his chest.

The waves were beginning to move up the beach a little. As they rolled in, they would lightly touch Gabrielle and David. "I like how that feels," Gabrielle said as she wiggled her toes in the water. David stroked her hair and kissed her forehead and she nuzzled closer to his face.

"See those stars right there," she said, pointing at the night sky. "Xena and I once noticed that they look like a big ladle. There's the handle, there's the bowl. See it?"

"The stars won't change much in just three thousand years," he replied. "We call that the Big Dipper."

Gabrielle laughed.

"What's so funny?" asked David.

"It's just that it's such a simplistic name," the bard answered. "I thought you were supposed to be so advanced. You couldn't come up with a better name than 'Big Dipper'?"

David wrinkled his brow and tousled her hair with mock indignation. She leaned on him again and they pulled each other still closer as the warm waves washed up on them.

In the shadows a short distance away, the odd curl of platinum hair was catching the moonlight. Aphrodite sat cross-legged with her chin in her hands and sighed dreamily to herself as she stared at the couple on the beach. "Now that's what I call love -- from the inside out. I haven't seen two people do it so passionately since..." She pondered for a moment. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've *ever* seen two people do it like that." She put her arms around herself as though she were caught up in the passion. "And they didn't even really *do* it," she giggled.

She silently stood up, unseen by the couple. "Those two deserve a chance at a really lasting relationship," she said as she brushed herself off. "Is anyone else going to do anything? Oh, no. It's up to me, as usual. Ah, well. I love my job, I really do." And with that, the goddess of love vanished in a dim, discreet flash of light.

Gabrielle was watching the moonlight as it sparkled on the water. "Let's stay and watch the sun rise," she suggested.

"I like that idea," David said. He didn't want to ever leave where he was, lying there, holding her. It tortured him to think that in not many days, he *was* leaving -- forever. He continued to stroke her long, strawberry blonde hair. "I wish that ..." he began, then abruptly froze.

"Please don't stop," Gabrielle begged, feeling that his hand no longer ran through her hair. "What do you wish?"

"Gabrielle, something's wrong." His face wore a look of confused panic. "I'm not sure ..." He suddenly gasped as his hand shot to his abdomen. "The tether! The tether's been cut!"

"What are you talking about, David?" Gabrielle asked, becoming very anxious herself. "What's wrong?"

"We have to get back to camp -- now!" was David's answer. "I'll explain on the way." The two hurriedly dressed and headed back into the woods at a brisk pace.

The sun began to peek over the horizon, despite the fact that, for Gabrielle and David, watching it rise in each other's arms would apparently have to wait for another day.

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART SEVEN

"You did what?" Scott angrily demanded.

"I turned off that machine of yours that makes that string thing that keeps you guys connected to the future," Aphrodite replied in a nonchalant sing-song. "I heard you explaining about it to Xena."

"But how did you ... no-one can ..." he sputtered.

"Oh, please! I'm a goddess. Your little security thingies don't mean anything to me."

"You're a goddess," Scott repeated with deadpan cynicism. He looked toward Xena.

The warrior slowly nodded. "That's Aphrodite, goddess of love."

Scott leaned his forehead wearily on one hand. He should have known better than to doubt. He looked up at the smiling goddess. He thought that if he had had to imagine what Venus would look like, she would certainly be it. He had to admit it, though this was the very woman who, with a twitch of her nose or whatever, had just made it completely impossible for he and David to ever get home. And speaking of David, where was he?

Apparently, the question had also occurred to Xena. "What have you done with Gabrielle and David?" she asked Aphrodite threateningly.

"What have I done with them? Not a thing, dear," was the goddess' reply. "Now what they've done with each other -- well! That's a different story!" She shivered with delight.

At that moment, David and the bard emerged into the clearing. Despite the emergency, Gabrielle seemed more than a little embarrassed at having been gone all night. Xena looked at her with vacant eyes.

"Scott!" called David, a bit out of breath. "The tether!"

"I know, I know," said Scott, already tired of panic. "It's been cut." He pointed with his thumb at Aphrodite. "And there's your girl. She did it. The goddess of love!"

David looked at the goddess in disbelief. This was ridiculous. He had come here not even believing the gods existed. His first encounter with one had threatened to end his life, now this one seemed as though it would change his life forever.

He turned again to Scott. "How could she possibly have done it?" he asked.

"Oh, please," Scott mocked bitterly. "She's a goddess!"

The four mortals sighed simultaneously, which was followed by an uncomfortable silence.

"Hey!" Aphrodite interjected. "What's everybody so bummed out about?"

David looked at her. "Why did you do it?" he pleaded, his face full of confusion and despair.

"Why? Why?" she repeated. "Why, I did it for you, loverboy. And for you," she said to Gabrielle. She leaned in close to the two of them. "You guys were amazing out there. You could almost teach *me* a few things."

The two lovers suddenly felt as though they were naked right then and there. "Do the gods watch *everything* you people do?" David asked angrily.

"Only when it's going to be really really annoying," answered the bard.

"Anyway," continued Aphrodite, "I thought you two deserved a shot at lasting happiness together. And you wouldn't have gotten it with this time thing working the way it was supposed to -- whisking you off, never to return. No, that would never do."

David sat down on the ground and sighed. He didn't know what to think or feel. He desperately wanted to stay with Gabrielle and yet he knew he had a job to do. Until now, he was sure of who he was and where he was from. Now he was an anonymous figure in his own distant past, which had suddenly become his present.

Aphrodite walked up to Xena. "You know, it did cross my mind that if you had a little extra time with Scotty ..." she began, but stopped when she saw Xena's menacing glare. "I should have known better," conceded the goddess, hands on her hips. "Whew, is it getting colder? Or is it just that I'm standing next to something frigid?"

The warrior drew her sword and, with a fierce cry, mercilessly slashed at Aphrodite. The blade passed cleanly through her, doing no damage.

"Take it easy, Xena. I was only kidding," said Aphrodite with a

careless wag of her head. "Methinks thou dost protest too much." Then she giggled, "One of the Muses taught me that."

"They need to go home, Aphrodite," Gabrielle finally said in an attempt to get back to the matter at hand. "Reverse what you've done."

"No can do, sweetie," the goddess replied. "With their rope to the future cut, they belong to *now*. Even I can't change that. I learned that from Scotty, too." She flashed a smile and a wave in Scott's direction and blew him a kiss.

Scott rubbed weary eyes full of exasperation and regret. "I don't believe this," he muttered.

Aphrodite stepped away from Xena into an area of her own and spoke as a celebrated hero accepting her accolades. "Well, you're welcome," she declared. Xena drew her chakram and hurled it at her with a fierce grimace. "Now, now, Princess," the goddess chided, shaking her finger. "Make love, not war." She then vanished just as the weapon was inches from her nose. It continued its travel, bouncing off three or four trees, then returning, as usual, to Xena's waiting hand.

"If she's supposed to be the goddess of love, why do I hate her so much?" Gabrielle rhetorically asked.

Both Scott and David were completely aghast. Maybe Xena and Gabrielle were used to things like this, but the travelers were not. They were far more accustomed to *predictable* destructive forces. Scott finally spoke. "There's got to be some way out of this -- some way to fix it."

"Not by what you told me," Xena said. "You said nothing could break a natural tether."

"Why does everyone have to pay so much attention to everything I say?" he lamented angrily.

"Look, there's no need to panic," Gabrielle said. "We'll come up with a solution. It may take some time, but we will get you connected to your machine so you can go home. We always find some way of doing what needs doing, don't we Xena? No matter how long it takes."

The warrior raised a doubtful eyebrow. As Gabrielle thought of David, she couldn't deny that a part of her hoped it would take quite some time.

"We've got ten days," David softly said.

The bard's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Ten days to find a non-existent solution to an impossible problem," Scott droned. "No big deal."

"What are you two talking about?" Gabrielle persisted.

"The pod itself is still working, and it's still tethered to the future," David answered. The women looked at David, eyes widening as they absorbed his simple statement of fact. "In ten days, that pod is

going home -- with or without us."

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART EIGHT

"Xena," Gabrielle called softly, touching the warrior's arm. "Xena ..."

The sleeping warrior stirred slightly. The dawn had barely begun to push aside the thick quilt of night.

"Xena, are you awake?"

"Well, Gabrielle," Xena grunted as she stretched. "I wasn't when you started to ask," she yawned, "but that's all changed now."

"I'm sorry, Xena," groaned the bard. "I just can't sleep."

"Scott and David gone fishing as usual?" Xena asked.

"Yeah," Gabrielle answered. "I think they do that just so they can have time to think. Time to discuss what they're going to do."

"Well," said Xena, "it's been, what, a week since Aphrodite's little stunt, and nobody has been able to come up with a way around this."

"What do you think of David, Xena?" the bard asked.

The warrior seemed a little startled by the question. "To tell you the truth, I haven't had much time to get to know him," she replied. After a pause, she said, "He seems to make you happy."

"You noticed, huh?" Gabrielle said.

"Yeah, I noticed," Xena sighed.

"You don't think their chances of getting home are too good, do you?" asked the bard.

"Realistically, Gabrielle, no, I don't. In three days, their machine will be gone and they'll have to start making serious plans about their lives here. I don't envy them, being stranded so far from home, having to start over."

The two sat in the semi-darkness listening as the first of the morning sparrows began their song.

"Xena, David asked me to marry him," said Gabrielle.

"What?" Xena said, now fully awake.

"He doesn't believe he's going to get home either," said Gabrielle. "He's starting to think of this as his home."

After a long pause, Xena spoke, only now her voice was cold. "That's nice Gabrielle. So where are you two going to settle down?"

"Xena, I haven't decided what I'm going to say," Gabrielle said, visibly upset. "What is it with you whenever the subject of David comes up?"

"Gabrielle, you're thinking of marrying a man who hasn't been born yet. Don't you think that makes him a little young for you?"

"Very funny, Xena," replied the bard angrily. "I told you this because I thought you could help me -- give me some emotional support like you always do. I guess I was wrong."

"I'm not sure what you want me to say," said Xena, still clearly guarded.

"I know he's not *supposed* to be here," Gabrielle said. "But he *is* here. And he'll probably be here for the rest of his life. And ..."

The bard looked directly at her companion, who refused to meet her gaze. "And I love him, Xena."

Xena's face began to soften, and now she looked into the bard's eyes. "And he loves you, too, doesn't he?" she sighed.

"Yes, he does," answered Gabrielle. "Very much. Xena, why are you having such a problem with this?"

Xena looked away again, as though she were hiding something. Then Gabrielle noticed a tear rolling slowly down the warrior's cheek.

"Xena," the bard said, touching her friend's shoulder, "Xena, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Gabrielle," the warrior began, clearly having a difficult time finding the words. "You know I'm happy if you are. That's how I felt when you married Perdicus, too. But ... saying good-bye to you was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life." She wiped the tear from her face. "I just don't like to think about having to do it again."

"Oh, Xena," Gabrielle said in a soothing voice, putting her arms around the warrior. "I don't even know that that's what would happen. It's different with David. He has no home here. If we got married, maybe he and Scott could just travel with us."

Xena, accustomed to being Gabrielle's comforter, her strength, was surprised at how easily she allowed herself to be held and comforted by the bard. It felt good.

"I'm not sure that would work out," the warrior said, looking concerned.

"Why not?" asked the bard, stroking Xena's raven hair, as the warrior had so often done when comforting her.

"Gabrielle, there's another reason it's been bothering me seeing you and David together," Xena replied.

"What is it, Xena?" Gabrielle asked, her face now looking puzzled.

Xena hesitated for a long time. "How long have we been together?"

"About three years," Gabrielle answered.

"Yeah, three years," Xena mused. "Sometimes, it seems like we've known each other for a lifetime."

"I feel the same way," the bard said in a gentle voice. "What are you getting at?"

Xena sighed and hesitated again, smiling slightly, almost seeming embarrassed. "I guess it's just that during the past year or so, I've begun to ..." She was cut short by the sound of twigs breaking under a man's weight.

"Are you two up already?" Scott said as he emerged into the clearing.

"We were talking," Gabrielle said to him, looking annoyed.

"I'm sorry," Scott said, sensing that he was interrupting something important. "Listen, maybe we can get lost for a while longer."

"No, no, it's alright," Xena quickly said, then whispered, "Gabrielle, it can wait."

Gabrielle's face wore an expression of concern and disappointment. It relaxed a little as David appeared.

"Good morning, Gabrielle," he said softly, and kissed her. "Is everything OK?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's fine," she said tentatively, looking in Xena's direction. Then she turned back toward David. "How was fishing?"

"Oh, we didn't really feel like fishing," David said. "We've had a lot to talk about. 'The day' is getting closer."

Scott jumped in. "Are you absolutely certain there's no other god, more powerful than Aphrodite, who'd be able to help us?"

"We've been through this," Xena reminded him. "Even if one of the other gods *could* help us, I don't think they'd be interested enough to actually do anything. The gods all have their own agendas. They don't care about much else."

The four were startled when a bright flash illuminated the early morning haze. When it was over, an unknown figure stood in the centre of the clearing. He was slightly taller than David but shorter than Scott, with hair a little longer than David's.

"I guess that's a fair judgment," the figure remarked in reply to Xena's statement. "I'm glad to see we're all being open and honest with each other."

"Am I supposed to know you?" asked Xena cynically.

"Does it matter? I'm here to help," he declared. "It just so happens that today, your little agenda fits in with mine."

"We don't even know who you are?" said Xena, folding her arms.

"Note how the Warrior Princess uses her body language to let me know she's not gonna back down," he observed. "Ooooh, I'm shaaakin'!"

"Xena, maybe this is one of the gods," whispered Scott. "You saw how he appeared. He says he's here to help. Maybe we should hear him out."

"I don't know," replied Xena. "I'm familiar with pretty much all the gods."

"I like to stay kind of incognito," interjected the stranger. "But if you're going to insist on introductions ..."

"We are," Xena said flatly, taking a step toward him. The others said nothing.

"OK, OK." Extending a hand to the warrior, he said, "I'm Methodicus -- god of Science."

David uttered a cynical cough. "There's no 'god of Science'," he said.

The god moved his hand before Xena could take it and pointed at David. "Good!" he said, walking past Xena in David's direction. "I like that. If you haven't heard of something before, you doubt it. Nice goin', Future Boy."

"Suppose you tell us what you're talking about," said Scott. "Are you saying you can help us get home?"

"Ah, first there's Future Boy, and here we have the more serious Future Man," Methodicus said in an affected deep voice, followed by an annoying, high-pitched laugh. "What I'm saying is, there *might* be a way for you to get home."

"What's in it for you?" Xena asked with a raised eyebrow.

"You never let up, do you?" he said to her. "What's in it for me is what's in it for all the gods. We don't want these jokers here any longer than they have to be. The only reason I had to come to the rescue is that I'm the only one who understands how this can be done."

"I don't get it," said Gabrielle. "If none of the gods want them to stay, why did Aphrodite break their machine?"

"Yeah, Aphrodite," mused Methodicus. "Let's just say she isn't one of

the 'brightest' Olympians." Then, looking toward Scott, he said in a low voice, "But really, who needs brains when you look like her?"

Scott gave him a disdainful look.

The god turned back to Gabrielle. "As Wonder Woman over there might put it," he said, pointing a thumb at Xena, "Aphrodite's very into her own agenda. She's not too good at seeing the big picture."

"What *is* the 'big picture'?" David asked. "Why don't the gods want us here?"

"Knowledge, travelin' man, knowledge," Methodicus answered, tapping David's forehead. "The gods have a pretty good thing goin' here. They don't need you guys around with your heads all crammed full of info nobody's supposed to know yet screwin' things up."

David spoke softly now to the god of Science. "Then it's true, isn't it? The gods are just an advanced civilisation from another planet. Olympus is just some space station or something."

"C'mere, c'mere," Methodicus said, beckoning David closer. He spoke in almost a whisper as David listened intently. "I'll neither confirm nor deny that."

David took on an expression of disgusted disappointment and began to move away, but then stopped when Methodicus spoke again.

"But I will tell you something," whispered the god. "Just between you and me, I don't think this is gonna last more than another millennium or so."

"What do you mean?" asked David. "What's not going to last?"

"The reign of the other gods," Methodicus replied. "They don't understand the human race. They get their power from fear and intimidation. What they can't get through their heads is, humans hate that, and their not gonna take it forever. One of these days, everybody's just gonna say 'Enough is enough' and that'll be it."

"I think you're right," said David.

"Yeah, well that's where I come in," Methodicus continued, still whispering. "The way I see it, I'll get people to follow me by just putting my ideas into a few choice heads, then letting them spread from there. People will do anything if they think they're doing it of their own 'free will'." He laughed cynically. "If my plan goes right, the human race will eventually be so devoted to me and my way of doing things that anyone who even suggests another way of thinking will be ridiculed and exiled. And I'll barely have to lift a finger."

"But since you're just laying low right now, why are you concerned with getting us out of here?" asked David.

"My plans could get knocked up too, if you hang around here too long," answered the god. "Knowledge before its time is always a bad

thing. Why do you think Ares wanted to have you killed? He was afraid of you."

"The god of war was afraid of me?" said David, both incredulous and strangely proud.

"Sure, you knew too much and he knew it," Methodicus said. "You see, the gods of Olympus can see into the hearts of men."

"You mean members of your species have some kind of telepathic abilities."

Methodicus shrugged. "You say 'potato' ..."

Scott cleared his throat loudly. "Are you two going to have your private little chat all day, or are we going to talk about a plan to get us home?"

"Your buddy's a tad on the impatient side, eh?" the god said to David. Then, he spoke more loudly. "Alright, alright, you wanna get home. It's a little complicated -- and it's not a guarantee, mind you. There are a lot of ... variable factors." As he finished his sentence, he looked toward Xena, whose face took on a questioning look.

"I have a question for you," continued Methodicus. "What's a thunderstorm?" After some silence, he took on an air of mock sternness. "Class, I know you don't know where this is going, but I still expect you to participate in the discussion. What is a thunderstorm? Would the young lady with the round, sharp weapon on her belt care to tell us?"

"Hard rain, thunder, lightning ..." began Xena, rolling her eyes.

David picked up the ball. "Clouds saturated with water, heavy ionisation of the air ..."

"ShhhhhhHHHH!" Methodicus frenetically warned David. "I'd like to hear this from a contemporary perspective please. Sheesh! That's why we want you out of here. You blab too much. Quill Girl! Fill 'em in on the *legend* about thunderstorms."

Gabrielle reluctantly assumed he was addressing her. "Some say that when a thunderstorm comes, it's because Zeus is angry. His temper is the storm."

"Bingo!" Methodicus exclaimed. He began to slowly pace back and forth. "Now, I won't say *every* storm is related to Zeus having a hissy fit, but the fact is, a few of the severe ones are caused by him on a bad day. That happens once in a blue moon."

The four mortals simultaneously glanced at the moon, which was its usual white.

"So what does this have to do with us?" Scott asked.

"Just this, Mr. Let's Get Down To Business. When Zeus lets loose, pretty much everything is up for grabs. Weather, life, death, tethers ..."

David and Scott both instantly perked up. "Are you telling us that Zeus has the ability to release natural temporal tethers?" David demanded.

"Oh sure!" Methodicus answered. "No biggie for Mr. Big."

"Then why can't someone just ask him to release them for a minute?" Gabrielle wondered. "You say all the gods want Scott and David to go home." As she said those words, her heart sank at the realisation that David's proposal of marriage may very well become moot.

"That's true," replied Methodicus, "but Zeus is another matter. For one thing, he's at the top. Usually, he doesn't give a rat's whiskers about what the rest of us want. And for another thing, he's really not into screwing with natural things. Unless, of course, he goes ballistic about something or other."

"Wait a minute," objected David. "When that happens, why doesn't everything just go flying around to other times?"

"Because there's no other tether to grab it," Methodicus answered. "The wave of disturbance follows the storm. The tethers are only off for about a minute, when the storm is closest. After that, they take hold again and everything's back to normal. But during that sixty seconds, you guys can get grabbed by your time machine, if we time the whole thing right."

"So what we need to do is really tick him off somehow," posited Scott.

"Maybe if we loudly curse his name or something," Gabrielle said.

"Yes, I'm sure that would just hurt his wittew feewings so much," Methodicus mocked. "Don't be such a blonde! He's king of the gods! What does he care what anybody says about him? No, he's concerned about ..." and he slowly turned toward Xena, "bigger issues."

Xena cocked a curious eyebrow. "What do you mean?" she asked suspiciously.

Methodicus slowly walked toward her. "Xena: Warrior Princess," he said. After walking a few paces in silence, he continued. "You've had quite a past, haven't you?"

"What's it to you?" said Xena with quiet defiance.

"Did you know that Zeus has quite an interest in you?"

"What are you talking about?" demanded the warrior.

"Yeah, it's hard for me to understand, too. But it's this whole turnaround thing you did."

"Go on," she said.

"He considers you his greatest example to humanity of how a person can change from evil to good. I mean, you changed from a ruthless

warlord to a defender of the weak. So that's a really big deal to him. I swear, sometimes he acts like the God of Israel."

Xena didn't know what to think. She felt strangely honoured, yet guardedly so. She was still waiting for the other boot to drop.

Methodicus went on. "The thing I can think of right now that would really break him up, really cheese him off, is if you dissed your whole goody thing -- went back to your old ways, joined up with Ares again, the whole bit."

Plop, thought Xena. There it goes. She said nothing. Gabrielle looked at her, trying to find some hint in her eyes of how she felt, but there was none.

"Kind of a sticky problem, eh, Xena?" the science god said. "Are you good enough to do good by becoming bad?"

As much as she hated to admit it (and as confusing as it was), Xena knew he was right. Her conscience would drive her to help, but was she willing to help by abandoning her conscience? Or did her self respect and reputation mean more to her than the lives of these men? And then there was the way she felt when Ares touched her -- when he spoke to her of their past conquests together. The Warrior Princess was getting a headache.

Scott broke the silence. "Listen, Methane, or whatever your name is. You're a god and this is the best you could come up with? You mean to tell me there isn't any other way?"

"Not one that can be planned and executed in the time we have," answered Methodicus. He pointed a thumb toward the pod. "That machine of yours has no mercy. In three days, it's gone and you guys will be spending the rest of your lives eating gyros and baclava."

"Well," began Gabrielle, "it's not going to happen. I guess we're stuck, because that's too much to ask. Tell him Xena."

"I'll do it," Xena said, no emotion in her voice.

"You ... you mean you'll tell him, right?" stammered the bard. "You'll tell him there's no way."

"I mean I'll do it. I'll go back to the way I was." The warrior was glad to be relieved of the tension of indecision. She began to feel a vaguely familiar rush of excitement run through her body. "I'll even join Ares."

A TIME FOR US

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PART NINE

Gabrielle was aghast for a moment. Then her face changed. "Obviously,

she's joking. Xena, can I talk to you?"

Xena gave her a sorrowful, but hard look. Gabrielle walked over to where Xena stood.

"Xena, what's going on?" demanded the bard. "What do you mean you're going to join Ares? What are you doing?"

"What I should have done a while ago -- as soon as I started to ..." The warrior broke off in mid-sentence, as though having second thoughts about what she had begun to say. She started again, more softly. "Look, Gabrielle, there's something I've finally learned. It's that I can't count on you to always be there. You've got your own life and one of these days, your path might take you away from me. I don't think I could stand that."

"So you'd rather leave first," Gabrielle said angrily. "Is that it?"

"It's not just that," continued Xena. "Lately, what we're doing has just seemed kind of ... pointless. We can't save the world, Gabrielle, so why try? Why not get as much of it as we can for ourselves? Maybe you should join Ares too."

"That's not funny, Xena. None of this is." Gabrielle thought for a moment. Then her face changed as she tried a new tack. "How do you expect anyone to take you seriously, Xena? Here you are, claiming to revert back to being a self-serving warlord, but the reason you're doing it is to help someone else. That's ridiculous!" The bard kept hoping that Xena would burst into laughter at any moment and stop this insane, frightening joke.

"For one thing," Xena explained, "I told you I had other reasons for doing this. Now just happened to be a good time for it. And besides, why not make my last good deed one for the history books?"

"History books," chimed in Methodicus. "That's funny!"

"No!" cried the bard. "You can't do this! I won't let you do this!"

"Please don't try to stop me, Gabrielle," Xena said flatly. She looked around in no particular direction. "Ares!" she called. "Ares, I know you're listening, so you may as well show yourself!"

A flash of light and the god of war complied. "Xena. Well, well. So this is what it takes to push you over the edge. Why didn't I think of it?"

Xena turned to face him and, catching sight of his muscular build, smiled a little. "Why should you have to think when the god of science is around?" she said in an effort to cover what *she* was thinking.

Ares diverted his attention from Xena. "Methodicus," he said slowly. "You decided to come out of hiding, did you?"

"Just for a little while, O Master of Mayhem," answered Methodicus.

"This is getting very weird," Scott muttered to himself.

"I suppose I have you to thank for getting Xena to finally join me," Ares said to the science god.

"Just a lucky coincidence for you, Buffy," answered Methodicus. "We both know all I'm trying to do is get these Sultans of Someday back where they belong."

"Whatever," said Ares. He turned to Xena and looked deeply into her steely blue eyes as if scrutinizing. "This is the closest I've been to happy in a long time. You wouldn't kid me now, would you, Xena?"

"Can't you tell?" Xena seductively breathed.

Suddenly, her warrior's awareness was piqued. She reached up with both hands just in time to intercept Gabrielle's staff before it crashed upon her head. She pulled herself up on the staff and with a characteristic war cry, flipped through the air and landed on the other side of the bard.

"I told you not to try and stop me," Xena warned as Gabrielle whirled to meet her gaze.

Gabrielle swung the staff at Xena's head, who deftly ducked to avoid contact. "If I can just knock some sense into you," Gabrielle said, swinging again with all her might, " -- give you time to think about what you're doing." Another avoided swing at the warrior's head. "After all, it worked once before!" she fiercely grunted. Several times, she fanned the air with her staff as Xena easily escaped the intended blows.

Finally, Xena had had enough. As the staff whizzed by her head again, she grabbed it and wrenched it from the bard's hand with little effort. A quick swing of the staff caught Gabrielle in the knees and sent her to the ground -- a move that the bard herself was quite familiar with. Unswerved from her mission, Gabrielle began to rise, only to be struck again by her own staff, this time in the back, sending her face first into the dirt. Now Xena waited for her to stand all the way. Then, with one swift, powerful jab, she connected directly with the bard's stomach.

Gabrielle's body had taken far more on several occasions. But knowing that Xena meant to hurt her -- hurt her and then leave her -- was a knowledge that threatened to drown her very soul. The reality of what was happening hit home and she doubled over with pain, humiliation, and despair. She ran to the edge of the clearing and lost what remained of the previous night's dinner.

David ran to Gabrielle. Scott just stared at Xena in disbelief.

After watching Gabrielle for a moment, Ares walked over to Xena. "You really mean business, don't you?" he said.

Xena had been watching the bard as well. In Xena's eyes was a touch of almost sorrow, but it soon disappeared and gave way to a blue that now seemed icy cold. "I'd better not stay here any longer," she said somberly. "I'll gather my things. I've got a lot to do."

"I've taken care of some little details for you," said Ares. "Namely, I've already gathered an army of some of the finest warriors. They all have a lot of respect for you, Xena."

"They'd better," remarked Xena as she put some bundles onto Argo's back.

"When you arrive, they'll be chanting your name just like in the old days," he assured her. "Yours and the name of your co-commander."

Xena stopped in her tracks. "What?"

"The man who'll be commanding the army with you," Ares continued.

"Forget it, Ares," Xena declared. "You know I work alone."

Gabrielle, who was still on her knees with her back to the group, took notice upon hearing Ares' announcement.

"Take it easy, Xena," said the war god. "It's just for the first couple of raids. Neither of you has done this for quite some time. I want you to learn from each other."

"Ares ..." said Xena in a warning tone.

The god waved his hand and another figure appeared -- a fairly tall man of medium but muscular build, with blond hair reaching to about the middle of his back. He was wearing clothes similar to those that Ares typically wore, only with a bit more metal here and there.

"Xena, baby!" he said, "It's been a long time. You're lookin' almost as good as me!"

"I think you two know each other," said Ares.

Xena stared in amazement. "Agathon. It can't be! You were ..."

"Killed?" said the man. "Come on, Xena. Don't diss me like that. It takes a lot more than an exploding castle to kill Agathon."

"Ares, is this some kind of joke?" demanded Xena. "I have to command an army with this prettyboy? That wasn't part of the deal."

"Funny, I don't remember there being any 'deal' at all," remarked Ares. "Now are you on the team or not?"

Xena slowly turned her gaze from Ares and looked over Agathon as though he were a piece of merchandise. "Can he fight?" she asked.

"What kind of question is that?" Agathon said indignantly. "I gave you a good run for your money last time, didn't I? And the god of war has been my personal trainer since then. Check out how buff I've gotten. And do you like the hair? I've let it grow even longer." He

stroked his own hair for a moment, then looking up, he did a double-take on Xena's raven locks. "But it's nothing compared to yours." Xena backed away a little as he reached out to touch the ends of her hair. "What's your secret?"

"Washing it once in a while," she said with a slightly disgusted expression.

Agathon pointed at her. "Good one, Xena," he said grudgingly.

She reached out slowly to touch his sword. "Is that ..."

"Nah, it's just regular metal," Agathon said in answer to her unfinished question. He drew the sword and inspected it absent-mindedly. "I can fight like a god with this, that, or the other thing."

Xena squinted at him, then spoke to Ares again. "I don't want to waste any time. Is there some kind of plan here?"

"Your army is ready to take Theopolis tomorrow," he answered. "Is that quick enough for you?"

"Then we better go," she said. She turned to the others. David, his arm around Gabrielle, was looking at Xena, his face showing confusion mixed with rising contempt. Scott seemed not to know what to think, though his face betrayed a twinge of suspicion. Xena seemed to connect with his gaze for a brief moment, then looked away. Gabrielle was still on her knees with her back toward the warrior.

"Goodbye, Gabrielle," Xena said.

"Just go," the bard answered coldly, unwilling to turn around and look Xena in the eye.

"Gabrielle, I ..."

"JUST GO, XENA!" Gabrielle cried bitterly. She closed her eyes and bit her lip in a desperate but futile attempt to hold back tears.

Xena silently mounted Argo, carefully guarding her own thoughts. Ares waved his hand and the three plus horse vanished, having been transported to where the army waited for their command duo.

There was a silence during which only the rustling of the trees and Gabrielle's quiet sobs could be heard. Then Scott spoke softly to Methodicus. "Why do you suppose it isn't beginning to storm yet?"

"It's my guess that Zeus isn't going to get really ticked until he knows she really means business," Methodicus theorised. "When they start the raid on Theopolis, that's when I think he'll hit the roof." After a pause, he added, "Then again, I may be wrong about the whole thing." Scott looked at him with greater disdain than before.

"I'm kind of surprised that Xena went for it," the god continued. "Who knew?"

"Yeah, that was a shock alright," Scott said. He was staring at

nothing and raising an eyebrow as he had seen Xena do so many times.

Methodicus walked over to where David was trying to comfort Gabrielle. At this point, simply staying near her was the best David could do. "She'll be OK," said the god. "She's a trouper." David shot him a sideways scowl.

Gabrielle suddenly stood up, staff in hand, eyes red, and faced Methodicus. "I've lost the two people I love more than I've ever loved anyone," she said angrily. "One of them left me in order to help the other one leave me! Does that make sense, Science God? Does that somehow fit in with your orderly, logical view of the world?"

"Shit happens," he answered flatly. After thinking for a moment, he added, "You know, if I were you, I'd write that down." While he was speaking, Gabrielle began to heft her staff. She pulled it back over her right shoulder. When Methodicus saw what she was doing, he quickly decided to make his exit. "I'll be back when the weather changes, kids," he said, and vanished just before the bard's mighty swing would have connected with him.

She connected instead with a tree near which he had been standing, and which was considerably more solid than Methodicus. The jolt shook her a bit. She threw down her staff in frustration and sat down on the ground, her face bathed in a thousand different emotions, none of them pleasant.

"He'd better come back," Scott said to David. "Other than authorised personnel back home, apparently only the gods can activate the tether generator."

"He'll be back," David assured him hopefully. He slowly walked over and sat next to Gabrielle, not saying a word, again simply letting her know that he was there. He knew she was in shock just now, but he also knew that underneath, she was strong, and would be able to make a life without him or Xena. He gently squeezed her hand. He was surprised to suddenly notice that Scott had come and sat down on the other side of her.

Scott spoke softly to the bard. "Gabrielle, I can't pretend to know what you're going through, but I want you to do something for me." The bard silently acknowledged his words. "Don't give up on Xena just yet," he continued.

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle asked, her brow furrowed.

"I can't explain any more," said Scott. "Just please, keep on believing in her for just a little while longer." He looked into her questioning eyes. "For me?" he pleaded.

"I ... I'll try," she replied. She cocked her head a bit.

He touched her shoulder. "Thanks," he said, and got up, leaving her alone for the moment. She ran a hand from front to back through her long hair.

David walked over to Scott and spoke to him quietly. "I hope you're not just telling her that to keep her spirits up for now. We'll

probably be gone in a couple of days. One thing she doesn't need is false hope."

"Dave, I agree with you," replied Scott. "Like I told her, I can't explain more. I just have a ..."

He was cut off by the sound of Gabrielle's voice from across the clearing. She was standing now and brushing herself off as she spoke loudly enough for the men to hear. "I'm hungry. Does anyone else want some breakfast?"

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART TEN

The sun was its usual evening shade of orange as Gabrielle and the time travelers finished a dinner of fish and bread that the bard had insisted on preparing, despite the men's offer to do so. She had barely spoken all day, and was attempting to stave off despair by keeping busy. She was trying hard to honour Scott's request of that morning to continue believing in Xena, but it was not an easy task. She felt angry and hurt and couldn't help picturing herself three days from now, completely alone. She wondered what life would be like if she went back to Poteidaia.

In contrast to the mood, the skies had been sunny and clear all day -- a fact which clearly disturbed Scott and David.

"What if Methodicus was wrong?" David said to Scott, making sure that Gabrielle couldn't hear him. "Or lying? Maybe he was just working with Ares to get Xena to join him."

"Maybe, but I don't think so," Scott said. "We should try not to think about it too much right now. Listen, why don't you two go for a walk. I'll clean up from dinner."

"Thanks, Scott," said David. "I think you're right. It probably would do Gabrielle some good to get away from here for a while."

David wondered how Gabrielle would feel about going for their usual walk tonight. Even after Aphrodite cut the tether, they had continued to take a walk along the beach every evening. She would read from one of her scrolls, or they would just talk, or sometimes they would just hold each other. It was on one such evening, in fact, that, believing he would never get home, he had asked her to be his bride. It all seemed like a distant memory now.

It took a bit of convincing, but she finally consented to go tonight as well. David was glad. She had held him up so wonderfully through those days when he wasn't sure of who he was or where he belonged. Now she was feeling that way and it was his turn to carry her.

The sky was still quite clear and the moon and stars shone brightly as they emerged from the woods onto the beach. They stood on the sand

and faced the sea, which in the darkness, seemed to stretch beyond the infinite.

Presently, Gabrielle reached into her satchel and pulled out a stone. She showed it to David. "Remember this?" she said.

"The dove-shaped stone," he answered. "The one you found the night we first ..." His voice trailed off as she hefted the stone in her hand.

"Doesn't seem too much point to it now, does it?" she said cynically. "'Fighting for peace.' Please!" She rolled her eyes. "You can't believe in anything anymore."

"Scott said we should keep believing in Xena," David said.

"Yeah, well, I said I'd try, but I'm not doing a very good job."

David gently took her hand in his. He noticed how soft it was, as though he were holding it for the first time.

"Xena said it herself," she sighed. "Maybe it's smarter to just live life trying to get the most we can get for ourselves." She let go of David's hand and pulled back with her other one -- the one with the stone in it. "So much for peace," she said, preparing to throw it as far as she could into the rolling waters.

Just as her arm was at the top of the arc, about to let the stone fly, David caught her fist in his. "Gabrielle," he said, with a stern tone in his voice. "If you don't fight for peace, just who do you suppose will?"

She stared at him, expressionless. Then her eyes shifted to the ground as her face slowly became enveloped in such sadness as David had never seen. She looked up at him again, all traces of cold cynicism gone from her. "I need you, David," she whispered.

With his free hand, he reached out and brushed her hair from her eyes. Gabrielle opened her fist, letting the stone drop to the sand, and put her arms around him as they surrendered to each other.

They made sweet, tender love deep into the night. He cared for her and gave to her as never before. As they made love, they barely spoke -- a silence born not of distance, but of understanding.

Later, with her head resting on his lap, she fell into much needed slumber. David couldn't sleep. He just watched Gabrielle and lovingly stroked her hair as she slept.

As the time for sunrise approached, he woke her gently. "We never did get to watch it together," he said. She kissed him sleepily and smiled -- the first time she had smiled since the previous morning. She sat up and cuddled next to him as they watched the sun slowly change from a sliver of light reflecting in beautiful patterns over the sea to a blazing, red-tinged yellow.

Shifting her eyes to the sand momentarily, she noticed the dove stone lying there. She gingerly picked it up and returned it to her satchel.

As they quietly watched the skies, the two began to notice the beginnings of clouds gathering in the north. They could feel a heaviness in the air. It was the kind of morning that makes old folks' joints ache ... and lets them know a storm is coming.

A TIME FOR US

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PART ELEVEN

Agathon crouched behind a rock formation in the pre-dawn shadows just outside Theopolis. The light of dawn was coming more slowly than usual today. The sunlight was hindered by rain clouds that seemed to be gathering.

"Could this be more perfect, Xena?" he said to the warrior next to him. "If it's raining when we attack, it'll really throw 'em off guard."

"Not that we needed an advantage," Xena replied with a slight smile. "There shouldn't be much effort involved here."

"You're right," said Agathon. "After this, we'll tell Ares we need more of challenge. The sooner we show him what we're made of, the sooner we can both be off doin' our own thing. This 'co-commander' stuff is bogus."

Xena agreed. She definitely wished she were commanding on her own today. Agathon seemed to know what he was doing, and that made it difficult. If he were a complete imbecile, she could simply dismiss him, but since he wasn't, she would actually have to work *with* him.

She was aware of a distant, barely perceptible flash of lightning. She counted silently. Then came the soft, but unmistakable roll of thunder. Ten seconds, she thought to herself.

Agathon ran his hand along the edge of his sword. "I haven't done this for so long. I'm telling you, Xena, I can almost taste the blood."

"Stick to the plan we agreed on, Agathon," Xena warned. "We're not going to go in there and start slaughtering everybody."

"I'm not that crazy about our plan," he said, still fingering his sword.

"I've done this more often than you have," Xena replied. "Mass killing might be fun, but it's a big waste of time. You can't sell dead people as slaves, now can you?"

"I guess not," he answered, looking at the city with steely eyes. "Not unless you talk fast and prop 'em up real nice."

Xena gave Agathon a disgusted look, but he just continued gazing at Theopolis. There was another flash of lightning, followed by thunder. Xena observed that this time, they were only nine seconds apart. This is it, she thought. "Sorry, Zeus," muttered the Warrior Princess under her breath, "but my life is my own."

"It's about time you showed up. We're getting close to zero hour."

"Take it easy, Methodicus," David said. "It only started raining a little while ago."

"I just don't want to cut it too close," Methodicus replied. "We've only got one shot at this, you know."

David seemed a bit troubled -- lost in thought. "Yes, I know."

"The rain's getting harder already," Scott observed.

"Yeah, it doesn't take long for Zeus' temper to build once he's really PO'd," said the god. "And Xena disappointed him big time."

Gabrielle sighed and shook her head. With every moment that passed, it was getting more difficult for her to believe in Xena. After all, she thought, wasn't the coming storm further proof that Xena truly had betrayed everything she stood for?

"So what's the deal here?" Methodicus continued. "Do you guys have to be pretty close to this thing for it to grab you?"

"We'd better stay within about ten feet of the pod," said Scott. "And you and Gabrielle should stand plenty clear."

"Then let's get into position," Methodicus ordered. He had to speak more loudly now to be heard over the increasing volume of the rain and thunder. "I don't think we have much time. Remember, we only have about a sixty second window when the storm is directly over us. That's the only time that this'll work."

"OK, let's do it," Scott said. "I assume you can turn on the tether generator," he queried Methodicus.

"Believe me, if Aphrodite could turn it off ..." the god began, peering inside the pod.

"Dave," shouted Scott. "Come on over. Gabrielle, you should stay where you are."

David turned to Gabrielle and, taking her gently by the shoulders, kissed her softly.

"You're not leaving right now," Gabrielle said with a little smile.

"Then why does it feel like I am?" he said as he held her. Then, looking her in the eye again, he added, "You wait here, OK?"

The bard nodded. Even with rain dripping from her face and making her hair stick to her, David still thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. In fact, just now she seemed more beautiful than ever. He reluctantly turned away and walked over to where Methodicus and Scott stood.

"Alright, here we go!" yelled Methodicus. He activated the generator, then moved away from the pod. "Now all we do is wait for that magic moment."

"It's just about time, Agathon," Xena said. "Let's ready the men."

"Bithcin'," Agathon replied. He followed her back to where their small but bloodthirsty army waited for orders.

Neither Xena, nor Agathon, nor any of the soldiers seemed to find the rain, which was now beginning to come down in sheets, the least bit daunting. On the contrary, they saw it as an advantage. The lightning had gotten brighter and more menacing and the thunder was louder. Xena continued to count the difference between the two. She noted that it was down to five seconds now.

"Are you sure we can trust these men?" Xena asked Agathon.

"You keep saying that," Agathon complained. "You're getting on my nerves. They've got blood in their eyes, but they're sworn to absolute obedience to us. They swore that to Ares himself!"

"OK, OK," she acquiesced. She brushed a lock of rain-soaked hair out of her face. "Let's go." There was more lightning and thunder. Four seconds, she thought.

"You heard the babe, dudes!" Agathon shouted. "Let's do it!"

Wicked shouts of joy erupted from the ranks of warriors. With Xena and Agathon leading the pack, they thundered across the muddy ground toward Theopolis.

By the time the guards at the gates realised the city was under attack, there was no time to make preparations to "greet" the advancing legion. The heavy rain and the sounds of the storm had perfectly masked the army's approach until they were almost upon the city. It seemed as though the gods themselves were working to ensure their success in taking this place -- a place that, by its name, purported to be the very city of the gods.

In accordance with Xena's plan, twenty of the men were carrying a large battering ram. As a show of strength, they were to break down the city gates without warning, then once inside, they would disarm and hold anyone with a weapon while Xena and Agathon attempted to extract a surrender. It was quite a test of the soldiers' loyalty, expecting them to restrain themselves from shedding the blood of hundreds of defenseless civilians -- like putting candy in front of a child and expecting him to ignore it. War was not always a pleasant business.

Somewhat to Xena's surprise, the army complied with orders quite well. They apparently didn't take lightly an oath to the god of war. They easily broke through the gates and stood ready, awaiting further orders, though even in the pouring rain, Xena could tell they were drooling at the hope of a massacre.

She timed the difference between another lightning bolt and its accompanying thunder clap at two seconds. It's getting closer, she thought.

Xena began to shout in a voice strong enough to be clearly heard over the storm. "In the name of Ares, god of war, we claim this city! Surrender to us and your lives will be spared!" She could hear the frustrated grunts of her soldiers. "Who is your governor?" she demanded.

She could see a handsome, stocky figure approaching through the rain. He, too, seemed undaunted by the downpour.

When he was close enough to Xena and Agathon to see the whites of their eyes, he began speaking. "I am Tiberus, governor of Theopolis. By what right do you make these demands of us?"

"We've already told you," the warrior princess answered. "This city belongs to us now -- and to Ares." She paused, staring at him. "We can take it the easy way, or the hard way."

Tiberus leaned closer to her, squinting his eyes. "You're Xena, aren't you?" he said. Xena did not seem startled at being recognised. "We've heard stories that you had turned from the ways of conquest," Tiberus continued. "Some even said you were here recently -- making peace -- turning away Ares."

"Yeah, well, you know how rumours are," Xena retorted with no smile at all. "Now, Tiberus ... what's it going to be?"

Tiberus folded his arms. His face turned from curious to steadfast. "We will not surrender," he declared. His determined words were underscored by piercing lightning and thunder that were virtually simultaneous, signaling Xena that the storm was now directly over them.

"Not smart!" declared Agathon, drawing his sword and raising it high.

"Back off, Agathon!" ordered Xena. Still speaking to Agathon, she looked at Tiberus, an evil grin enveloping her face. "He's mine!"

"Cool, Xena," replied Agathon. "You know what to do." From his pack, he produced a sheepskin bag. "I'm ready," he said.

Xena recognised the bag. So did Tiberus. It was what warriors often referred to as a "trophy bag." In certain circles, it was traditional to bring back a head from among one's conquests as a memento -- usually the head of the commander of the opposing army, or in this case, the governor of the city.

She looked at the bag for a moment, then back at the governor. "He's right," she said, with no trace of compassion in her voice. "You'd do

a lot better for yourself and your people to change your call."

"And what kind of life would we have as conquered people?" he asked rhetorically. "We've all talked of this before. We'd rather die than surrender."

"So be it," Xena said. She raised her sword high above Tiberus' head. The skies were dark from the storm. A flash of lightning illuminated the scene for an instant. One second later, by Xena's count, a crash of thunder added a further dash of suspense to the macabre still life. Tiberus shut his eyes and calmly prepared for a swift but painful passage into the Elyssian fields.

Xena's arms relaxed for a moment as they continued to hold up her sword. "Fool!" she said, making sure to sound as fierce as possible. "Are you sure about this?"

"Oh, for Zeus' sake, Xena!" cried Agathon. "Have you forgotten how to do this, or what?" He rushed her, and, taking her by surprise, managed to push her out of the way. His sword glinted in a burst of lightning as he hefted it into the air and aimed it sharply at Tiberus' neck. "*This* is how you deal with an uppity governor!" he announced triumphantly.

The torrential rain pounded the trees above the clearing, sending generous amounts of water down through the tangled foliage overhead. David, Scott, Methodicus, and Gabrielle simply waited. The storm was almost directly over them, and if Methodicus was right, there would shortly be about sixty seconds during which the travelers' machine could "grab" them and connect them once again to the time from whence they came. Now that they were all in position and the machine was on, one minute seemed like quite a comfortable window.

Both Scott and Methodicus were keeping their fingers crossed that the plan would work. David, however, seemed distant and increasingly agitated. Because of the darkness of the storm, he could barely see Gabrielle across the clearing.

"You alright, Dave?" Scott asked.

"Uh ... yeah, yeah, I'm ... fine," said David, his eyes still fixed on the shadowy figure of the bard. A sheet of lightning illuminated the clearing and for an instant, even from a distance, David could swear that he could see into Gabrielle's eyes. His own eyes widened. "No!" he suddenly shouted, and began bounding across the clearing toward her.

"Dave!" Scott called after him. "Dave, what are you doing?"

David continued to run toward the bard, splashing mud as he went.

As he neared Gabrielle, she stared at him with incredulous eyes. "David, aren't you supposed to stay over there?" she asked him worriedly when he was close enough to hear.

"Gabrielle, I can't," he answered, slightly out of breath. "This is

crazy. I don't want to go back. This is my home now. This is where I belong -- here, with you."

Suddenly, Scott felt a jolt, then after a moment, the familiar tug of the artificial tether in his abdomen. He smiled broadly and looked toward Methodicus, giving him a thumbs up. Methodicus returned the gesture, then pointed toward David with a concerned expression.

"Dave!" Scott shouted. "It's working! You've got less than a minute! Get back over here!"

David seemed not to hear him at all. "You don't have to be alone, Gabrielle," he said. He reached for her and she put her hand against his. Their fingers intertwined. "Say you'll marry me. Tell me I can live the rest of my days here with you by my side."

More than anything she had ever wanted, Gabrielle wanted to throw her arms around him and welcome him home -- to tell him that she would, of course, marry him. She couldn't keep from imagining herself living without this pain, this loneliness. And so she knew that what she was about say would perhaps be the most difficult words she ever uttered.

"No, David," she said, clutching his hand tightly and slowly shaking her head. She just looked at him for a moment, trying to disguise how hard it was for her to push the words out. "We both know the way things have to be. You belong with your people, and I belong here -- with or without Xena."

David hung his head. Gabrielle let her staff fall and slipped her arms around his waist. They held each other close as the rain masked their tears.

"Look inside yourself," she said. "You know I'm right."

He sadly nodded as he ran his hand through her rain-soaked hair. "Yes, I know," he answered.

"I know, too," came a voice from behind him. He turned his head to see Methodicus pointing toward Scott and the pod. "Now get your butt over there!"

David turned back to Gabrielle. "You'd better go," she said. He nodded and began walking away, touching her for as long as he could until only their fingertips were in contact. She sadly watched as he walked over to where Scott, and his future, waited.

Methodicus smirked and shook his head as he, too, watched David follow his lamentable destiny. His expression changed as he turned to Gabrielle. "Listen," he said, putting a hand to her shoulder, "I'm ... sorry about the way things have worked out for you."

The bard looked at him curiously.

"Well, Hercules isn't the only god who gives a damn about mortals once in a while, you know," he said defensively. "He's just more ... incessant about it."

"Thanks, Methodicus," she said, giving him a grateful smile. "I guess

I'll be OK." She looked back toward David.

As David neared Scott, he experienced a jolt that made his hair stand on end, then he, too, felt the future in his belly.

"You made it just in time," Scott told him with relief. "I think the storm's beginning to move away." One close look at David told Scott that he was not in a mood to rejoice and, giving David's shoulder an understanding pat, Scott said nothing more.

David could again see only Gabrielle's silhouette. She was standing holding her staff, her hair tossed by the winds. She looked so strong. She'll need that strength in the days ahead of her, thought David. By tomorrow night, he'd be gone and she would be alone. He knew that the personal storms ahead for Gabrielle would easily dwarf anything born of Zeus' fury.

The scores of people gathered at the gates of Theopolis paid little mind to the driving wind and rain. The army watched with anticipation as Agathon prepared to relieve Tiberus' shoulders of the burden of a head. The guards and citizens who had been rendered ineffective watched with a mixture of pride and horror as their beloved governor stood firm in their shared conviction that death was preferable to slavery. Xena continued to anxiously count the seconds between lightning and thunder.

Two. She counted two! The last time it had been one. At last, the storm was moving away. It was time. The Warrior Princess sprang into action.

Agathon's sword slashed the air en route to its target, but before it reached home, it had an abrupt encounter with something far more solid than Tiberus' neck. With the loud clang of metal against metal, Xena's sword stopped Agathon's blade cold and pushed it clear of the governor.

"Look, forget it, Xena," Agathon snarled. "You were taking way too long to handle this. I'm takin' over." He again pulled back his sword and readied it to behead Tiberus.

"That's where you're wrong ... 'dude'," sneered Xena mockingly. With a shrill cry, she kicked him sharply in the side, knocking him well away from striking distance of his would-be trophy. Tiberus was getting a bit confused, having prepared himself for death twice in the last two minutes, only to have his life saved by the woman who first threatened it.

"I don't know what kind of power trip you're on, but it's over," declared Agathon. "It's time to trash this place." He turned toward their waiting soldiers. "Kill 'em all!" he ordered. "Let's do it!"

The warriors were only too glad to oblige. They had dreamed of such an order since they began their march toward the city. They drew their swords and eyed the townspeople hungrily.

"No!" Xena barked before a single blade could pierce Theopolean flesh. "Stand your ground!" With a collective groan, the soldiers

reluctantly complied.

"Hey!" Agathon yelled to the men as he stood up. "Are you gonna listen to a chick?" He motioned to them and mocked the sound of a whip cracking. "Come on! You know what you wanna do. So do it!"

As they began to again draw their swords, Xena's voice boomed over the rain. "You gonna follow Beach Boy? Most of you know me. You've either fought with me or against me. You know better than to turn on me. Now, sheath your weapons!"

Agathon glared at her. They both knew what would happen next. The army, bound tightly by their oath, were split virtually in half over which of the now disagreeing duo they should follow. The residents of Theopolis were safe and ignored as the soldiers began to turn the ferocity of their bottled-in bloodlust against each other.

Xena turned her attention to Agathon just as he lunged toward her, leading with his sword. She leaped into the air, leaving only empty space for his blade to pierce. He found himself sprawled in the mud and looked back to see Xena land on her feet, facing him.

He tackled her and as their soldiers continued to eliminate each other, the two rolled over and

over in the mud, each trying to gain the upper hand.

"Wow, Xena," he exclaimed. "In another situation, this could be kinda ... you know ... exciting!"

"In your dreams, Dragathon!" retorted the Warrior Princess as she grabbed hold of his arms and

flipped him backward over her head.

As she rose to her feet, he managed to land on his and rushed at her while her back was to him.

She ducked in time to avoid lethal contact and used his own momentum to again hurl him through the air. He again landed well and the two faced each other.

"Give it up, Muscle Man," Xena said, her eyes narrow and a sinister grin on her lips.

"No way!" Agathon replied. "This is way too much fun."

He came at her screaming fiercely, his long, gleaming sword extended toward her. How typically male, she thought.

In the nick of time, she crouched down and, with a yell of her own, intercepted his knees, sending him once again face first into the deepening mud. This time, she was close at hand by the time he regained his sight and each time he attempted to rise, her foot found some part of his face or other to be a convenient target.

Finally, she stood over him, her weapon pointing straight down at him, and his up at her. By this time, the brawling soldiers (those that remained standing), had quieted down somewhat, realising that the question of who to obey would soon be decided.

"What gives, Xena?" Agathon said, panting. "I thought we were a team."

"Agathon," she replied with an exasperated tone, looking straight into his eyes, "don't be such a blonde." With that, she quickly pulled back her sword and, with a mighty swing and a loud triumphant clang, knocked his from his grip. He watched, dumbfounded, as it flew well out of his reach, landing in the wet grass. He looked back at Xena to see the point of her blade less than an inch from his nose.

His expression changed to one of anger. "What are you waiting for, Xena?" he sneered. "End it!" He waited, then loudly demanded, "Come on! Or is that too much to ask of a WOMAN?"

The Warrior Princess raised her weapon high. "Let's do it!" she breathed, and brought the sword swiftly down upon Agathon's head.

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART TWELVE

Gabrielle absent-mindedly observed herself in a motionless pond as she slowly brushed her hair. It was morning, or perhaps afternoon -- which, she couldn't tell. She wasn't even quite certain where she was -- only that she was alone.

"What are you thinking about?" she heard a voice ask. She dropped her hairbrush and reached for her staff as she quickly looked around to find the origin of the sound.

"Down here, goofball," mocked the same voice. It sounded very close, though the bard could see no-one nearby. As she visually swept the area, something caught her eye in the pond. When she looked, there seemed to be nothing there -- not even a ripple. But as she continued gazing at the water, she began to notice that she seemed strangely out of sync with her own reflection. It didn't move when she moved.

Then it did move, but on its own. "Yeah, it's me," it said. "I asked you a question. What are you thinking about? I know how you contemplate heavy junk while you brush your hair."

"You can't be talking to me," the bard reasoned. "You *are* me."

"Well, duh!" retorted the image in the water. "Look, it's time we had a serious talk. I'm tired of us having to lose out on happiness all the time because you keep screwing it up."

"What are you talking about?" Gabrielle asked.

"What am I talking about?" repeated the reflection. "Let's see. Let's go over the events of the past month, shall we? First, you fall in love with a guy that you know has to leave. There's a smart move. Strike one. But Love comes to the rescue. Aphrodite tries to help you out by trapping him here."

"I don't need that kind of help," countered the bard.

"Yeah, sure you don't. Anyway," the reflection continued, "things are looking up. He asks you to marry him. But then you go and blab to Xena about it -- strike two."

"She's my best friend!" Gabrielle said defensively. "I had to tell someone."

"Come on!" the pond bard challenged. "You knew she wasn't too happy about the idea of you and David together. I know you knew. Remember, I'm you."

"OK, so what?" the real bard asked.

"So it's no big surprise that she felt betrayed and found it easy to cut out, given the chance. And that chance just happened to be the way to get Davy out of here too. So you lose both at once. Nice shot."

"Look, I've been over that with Methodicus already," Gabrielle said. "You heard his answer to that one."

"Oh, yeah, I remember," said the reflection, rolling her eyes. "That was a nice easy out answer for you. Just blame it all on the Fates."

"Are you saying all this is **my** fault?" asked the bard indignantly.

"Check out the final chapter. After everything that's happened, Davy says, 'Gabrielle, I don't want to go home. I want to stay with you for the rest of my life.' He's ready to give up everything and start over in a totally foreign culture just to be with you. And you turn him down. Strike three, you're out."

Gabrielle was silent for a moment. "I was only trying to do what was right," she replied sadly, looking into the distance.

"That's one way to look at it, I guess," said the girl in the water. "But you did just willingly trade in a life with the man you love for a life alone."

"It wasn't meant to be!" the bard forced herself to say.

"Oh, yeah," the reflection said. "I remember your speech. 'You belong there, I belong here. Look inside yourself.' 'Look inside yourself'? Where did you get that? Even you wouldn't write something that bad!"

Gabrielle picked up the biggest rock she could find -- one that she needed both hands to lift. "Write this!" she snarled as she threw it into the pond, dissolving the surly version of herself into a million tiny ripples. When the water quieted, her reflection was once again a

mere compliant image, mimicking her every move without additional comment.

She looked into the sky, her gaze searching back and forth. "Morpheus!" she called angrily. She waited a moment, as if expecting an answer. "Listen, thanks for the little chat with my own self-doubt and everything, but I think it's about time for this dream to end, don't you?"

After a few seconds, there came a sound from everywhere and nowhere. "Alright, Gabrielle. Have it your way."

The bard's eyelids began to flutter as she stirred restlessly. She was aware of a voice.

"Have it your way, Gabrielle."

She opened her eyes to see David's affectionate, playful smile.

"Just sleep through our last day together," he was saying. "See if I care."

She groaned sleepily, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him a warm squeeze. "How long has the sun been up?" she yawned.

"Oh, just a little while," he answered. "You didn't miss much."

As she stretched, she became aware of a familiar aroma wafting toward her. "Pan bread," she declared. "You made pan bread?"

"Scott did," David replied. "Come and have some." He took her by the hand and brought her near the fire. She stumbled a little as her feet sank into the dirt, still quite soft from yesterday's rainstorm. As she sat down and caught more of the smell, she began to realise how hungry she was, probably from having slept so late.

"Good morning," beamed Scott as he handed her a warm piece of bread.

Gabrielle smiled and took a bite. "This is wonderful," she said. "What did you do to it?"

"I made it just like you do," Scott answered, "except I prepared a little of the sap from this tree and added it to the dough. It gives it a kind of sweet taste."

The bard hungrily took another bite. "You never told us you could cook," she said.

"It's no big deal," he shrugged with a smile. "I just figured you might appreciate sleeping in this morning."

In some ways that was true, she thought. Yesterday had been tiring. The storm had finally ended sometime in mid-afternoon. Then, she and David had had to deal all over again with the reality of David's departure and Gabrielle's ensuing loneliness. With a little moral

support from Scott, they had finally reached the conclusion that the only thing to do was to make the best of the time remaining rather than ruin even that by mourning over the future. Gabrielle had all but decided not to go back to Poteidaia. She had begun to visualise herself as a lone, traveling bard, and was actually beginning to feel a twinge of excitement at such a prospect.

"So Scott," she said as she started on the last piece of the sweet bread, "has your little trip to 'ancient' Greece turned out anything like you thought it would?"

"How many languages can you say 'no way' in?" he replied. After taking another bite himself, he continued, "But from a historical research point of view, we've gotten a lot of very valuable stuff. For instance, the business about the gods actually existing -- we'll probably write a whole dissertation on that alone."

"And Theopolis," David added. "We never knew Theopolis existed. The ruins must be buried very deep for some reason. Now that we know where it is, we'll probably be able to dig it up."

"Well, Xena and Agathon have probably already created some nice ruins for you," Gabrielle said with some disgust in her voice. "Xena the warlord doesn't tend to leave much standing."

The time travelers grew silent. David touched Gabrielle's hand lightly. She took his hand and continued to eat, looking at the sky, the ground, brushing back her hair. It was clear to David that she was attempting to appear nonchalant, as if thoughts of Xena had no effect on her. He knew that she had a long road ahead of her in dealing with her feelings toward the warrior. He was filled not with pity for her, but with gentle admiration.

In the silence, Gabrielle became still and cocked her head. "Do you hear that?" she said.

"What?" David asked, noticing no unusual sounds. "What do you hear?"

The bard listened for another moment. "Hoof beats," she answered. "And they're getting closer."

David looked at Scott. They both were beginning to hear it as well. Gabrielle put down her breakfast and stood, her staff firmly in hand. The sound of a horse was unmistakable now, and it was becoming clear that their camp was its destination. The three readied themselves for whatever defense might become necessary.

They stiffened as the foliage rustled in front of them. An off-white muzzle emerged followed by the rest of the familiar mare on top of which the raven-haired warrior sat.

"Xena," said Scott with a confused look mixed with the hint of a smile in his eyes.

Gabrielle relaxed a bit, then her expression turned to one of angry suspicion. "What are you doing here, Xena?" she asked coolly. "Have you come to pillage us or something?"

"Nah!" answered Xena, hopping down from Argo. "I just brought you a

little ... trophy of war," she hissed, grinning and brandishing a sheepskin sack.

The bard recoiled. She had seen trophy bags before. She shuddered at the thought of what was inside. It must be the governor, she thought. She wondered what had possessed Xena to bring it here to show her. What was she hoping to accomplish by rubbing it in?

Xena reached inside the bag and Gabrielle began to hope that Scott would not take offense if she lost the breakfast he had prepared. The warrior's hand slowly emerged, clutching a handful of thick, dingy blonde hair.

That's not Tiberus, thought Gabrielle. He had short, dark hair. Then the bard remembered where she had seen those locks before. "Agathon?" she asked Xena, pointing sheepishly.

"That's right," Xena said.

"But I thought you two were working together," said the bard.

"That's what he thought, too," replied the warrior, maintaining a look of evil joy on her face.

With her other hand, she pulled the bag away to reveal its full contents. "No, Xena!" Gabrielle screamed, and turned away in time to hear the empty bag hit the ground.

"Whatsamatter, Gabby," said Xena with a laugh, "haven't you ever seen hair before?"

Gabrielle, wondering what the warrior meant, began to slowly, cautiously turn back toward her. Xena's hand could barely grip the massive, flowing strands she held, now being freely tossed by the breeze.

"Hair?" said the bard. "But, but don't you usually ... where's his head?"

"His head? Yechh! Bad enough to bring this," Xena said, holding the hair up to her nose and sniffing it with a disgusted expression.

"I don't get it," admitted the bard. "You mean you didn't kill Agathon? You just cut off all his hair?"

"Hey! Only from his head," Xena corrected her.

There was suddenly a familiar voice from elsewhere in the clearing. "Bravo, Xena, bravo," droned Methodicus, smiling and clapping slowly. "Quite a little trick you pulled off. Nobody does it better."

"Did it work?" Xena asked him eagerly.

"It worked great," he replied. "Thanks to you, tonight, these guys will be history. Or I should say, we'll be history to them." He uttered his characteristic high-pitched laugh. "I can't believe you had me fooled! I should've known there'd be glaciers in Tartarus before you'd join back up with Ares. Especially after he hit you with that Agathon business. That should've been a dead giveaway." He shook

his head with a smile. "By the way, how is the young upstart?"

"Naked and bald," replied the warrior.

"You took his clothes, too?" exclaimed the god of science, dissolving into a fit of laughter.

"Xena, what's going on?" Gabrielle demanded. "Do you mean to tell me that this was all an act?"

Xena turned to the bard, her evil expression finally giving way to one that was more familiar to Gabrielle -- strong and kind. "Yes, Gabrielle," she said. "I'm sorry I had to keep you in the dark, but I couldn't risk Zeus finding out. It was important for him to think I was for real."

Gabrielle was aghast as everything sank in. She didn't know whether to be overjoyed or angry. On the one hand, she had been duped and hurt and put through an emotional wringer. But on the other, this meant that all of her anxiety about the coming days and years alone, all of her hopelessness at the thought of the Warrior Princess returning to a life of violent conquest, all of that was no longer an issue. She and Xena could be together now as they always had been.

But there was still a question in the bard's mind. How far had Xena gone to pull off the charade? She didn't want to ask, but knew she must. "How about Theopolis? What happened to them?"

"No innocent people were killed," Xena answered compassionately, understanding Gabrielle's anxiety. She turned to Methodicus. "You said the tethers would only be unhooked for about a minute, while the storm was right overhead. So I stalled the action until I could tell the storm was moving away. I knew then that either the plan had worked or it was too late. Either way, I knew I was free to show all my cards and take care of Agathon."

Hearing of the lack of carnage, Gabrielle felt a great wave of relief flood over her.

"You know," said Methodicus, finally regaining his composure, "Ares isn't gonna like what you did to Agathon. He'll want to make you pay."

"Ah, tell him to make like a maimed duck and send me his bill," Xena remarked offhandedly. There was a moment of silence as the group stared at her with confused expressions. "Hey, I just scammed the king of the gods," she finally said. "I can't help it if I'm in a giddy mood."

A wave of barely repressed laughter spread through the gathering. Gabrielle no longer felt torn between anger and joy. She threw her arms around Xena and held on as though her life depended on it. "Oh, Xena," she cried, "I can't ... I thought ..."

"I know," said the warrior softly, happily returning the embrace. "You thought you had lost me."

"Worse," Gabrielle choked, "I thought you had lost yourself."

Xena squeezed the bard even tighter and shut her eyes against the tears. "I'm so sorry I had to hurt you, Gabrielle," she said. "With Ares staring at me, I had to be convincing. I never would have gone any further than I did, I swear."

"You were very convincing," said David, breaking his silence. "You had everyone fooled."

Xena slowly let go of Gabrielle. "Not everyone," she said, turning toward Scott. He smiled at her warmly.

"That's right," Gabrielle said to Scott. "You were never really convinced that Xena had joined Ares. How did you know?"

"I just knew Xena wasn't stupid," Scott explained. "She had to know that her joining Ares would have a far greater impact on history than David and I being stuck here. She'd never have made a trade like that."

"I could see on your face that you weren't buying it," Xena said.

"But why couldn't you just tell us that?" asked Gabrielle.

"I didn't want to say anything or even think about it," answered Scott. "I didn't want to take a chance that any gods would get wind of it and it would get back to Ares or Zeus."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Methodicus objected. "I'm the god of science. Why didn't that neat little piece of logic occur to me?"

"Well, it wasn't just that," Scott admitted. He looked in Xena's direction. "You haven't seen the pain in her eyes when she talks about her past. I have. I knew she'd never go back to that." The words made Xena's face deeply soften.

"Hmph," grunted the god with a smirk. "Leave it to a mortal."

"Leave it to a friend," added Xena, never taking her eyes off Scott.

"But why didn't I think of it?" Gabrielle wondered aloud. "I've known Xena longer than anyone. I should have realised."

"Deep inside, you probably did," Scott answered. "But you were too hurt to think clearly -- too involved." He began to walk toward the bard. "Me, I'm just a nobody who'll be gone forever before midnight."

"You're not a nobody, Scott," said Gabrielle, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for the ray of hope -- even if it only seemed like a pinhole at the time."

"Well, I don't want to disturb this little love in," Methodicus interjected, "but I think it's time I slunk back into the shadows."

Scott turned toward the god. "Thanks for everything, Methodicus. We

wouldn't be going home without your help."

"Damn right," he replied. "Now there's something I want you to do for me. Something I want from the four of you."

"What is it?" asked Xena with a raised eyebrow, suspiciously dreading the sound of a god calling in a favour.

"Simple," said Methodicus. Then he almost whispered, "Forget I was ever here." He looked at David. "You know me. I like to stay behind the scenes."

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," David said.

"Well said, Future Boy," Methodicus replied. "So, do I have your word?" The mortals mumbled general consent. The god narrowed his eyes at Gabrielle. "Especially you, Quill Girl."

"Alright, alright," she grumbled. "I guess I'll have to figure out some way to tell this epic story and leave you out of it."

"Uh, Gabrielle," David said sheepishly, "maybe you should think again about telling the story at all. You're supposed to forget we were here too, remember?"

"Fine," the bard said tersely as she folded her arms in disgust. "I can't believe I can't write about this! It could have been the greatest story ever told."

"There'll be others," Scott said with a wink in David's direction.

"Well, so long, everybody," said Methodicus. "See you in the ... well, I'll see you around." He looked at Gabrielle and his face softened a bit. "Here's looking at you ... kid," he said, and in an unobtrusive flash of light, he was gone.

"Now *that*, I think I'll write down," Gabrielle said.

After a moment, Xena spoke. "We've all had an intense couple of days," she suggested. "I think we deserve a big farewell dinner tonight."

"And I think Scott should fix it," David suggested. "You should have tasted his breakfast."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Scott protested, scowling at his partner. "I didn't say ..."

"So you cook, do you?" Xena said as she walked slowly toward the traveler. She gently grabbed the collar of his tunic. "Nobody holds out on the Warrior Princess. I'm in the mood for wild boar. I'll help you hunt one down, but you've got to butcher it and cook it."

Scott was about to object further, but thought better of it. "You know me," he said with a grin. "I'm always open to new experiences."

"Hey, Xena," Gabrielle called, as she idly inspected the contents of the trophy bag, "how come some of this hair is tinged red?"

"Oh, he didn't cooperate very well with his haircut," shrugged the warrior, adding with one final return of her evil grin, "I might've nicked him a little."

The bard shook her head and smiled as she scrutinised the stained locks.

"Let's get going, Scott," said Xena. "Our dinner's not gonna just jump onto my sword."

"Whatever you say," laughed Scott, as he followed her through the trees. David and Gabrielle listened as the sounds of Xena and Scott talking and laughing faded into the thick woods.

"I'm glad you're not going to be alone, Gabrielle," David said.

"Me too," replied the bard, as she easily slipped into his embrace.

He gazed into the crystal green pools of warmth that were her eyes. "I'll miss you so much," he said sadly.

Gabrielle gently put her finger to his lips. "Shhh," she whispered, and as they began to exchange soft, lingering kisses, they both found themselves hoping that the boar would prove a formidable prey for Xena, prolonging the hunt for as great a time as possible.

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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PART THIRTEEN

"So the world is round, you say," remarked Xena lazily, staring into the dying fire, intoxicated both by the wine and by the sensation of completely sated hunger. Scott was, indeed, a quite competent cook. The boar had been tender and flavoured with various herbs and the four had all eagerly eaten beyond their fill. "OK, it's round."

David appeared bewildered. "I guess I thought that would surprise you more," he said.

Xena pulled the chakram off her belt. "Well, no-one's ever gotten close enough to the edge to map it," she said. She held up the circular weapon and scrutinised it from various angles. "Round makes about as much sense as any shape."

"Oh," said David, "I don't mean round like that. I mean round like ..." He searched the ground, finally finding and picking up a nearly spherical stone. "... like this. Like a ball."

"That's crazy," chimed in Gabrielle. "Look at all the wasted space!"

David turned toward the bard. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, look, pretty much everyone has to live right around here," she explained, running her finger around the top part of the rock, "because if you live too far from the top, you're going to slide right off. So the whole thing except this little area up here is a waste."

"Oh, I see," chuckled David. "That's not true. See, everything is pulled ..."

"Dave," Scott interrupted in an admonishing tone, "you're doing it again."

"Doing it?" David said with feigned innocence.

"Ix-nay on the 'uture-fay 'nowledge-knay," said Scott with clenched teeth.

"Yeah, look who's talking," David laughed. "You're the one who got us into all this trouble by explaining the time pod to Xena."

"How was I to know Aphrodite was snooping around?" Scott protested.

David turned apologetically to Gabrielle. "This is more of that stuff you're supposed to pretend you never heard, OK?"

"No problem," replied the bard with a crooked smile.

"Great dinner, Scott," said Xena, changing the subject. "Maybe I should have let you stay trapped here after all."

"I can think of worse fates," Scott replied. Then, with a wink, "But if I can roast a boar, so can you. You should try it sometime."

Gabrielle snickered at the suggestion. Xena narrowed her eyes at Scott and took another sip of wine as the four fell into a contented silence. Calm twilight had settled over the clearing like a comforting blanket -- an appropriate setting for this night of sweet sorrow. David noticed an occasional breeze disturb Gabrielle's hair. He smiled wearily.

Presently, a sound similar to, yet not at all like, a bird's song was heard. It seemed to be coming from the time pod.

"That's a warning," Scott said in answer to Xena's questioning eyes. "The pod is leaving in fifteen minutes."

They all slowly stood, aware of the urgency of the moment, yet wanting desperately to preserve the relaxed atmosphere.

"I guess this is it," said Gabrielle. She approached Scott, knowing it would take a few moments for her to be able to bear bidding David farewell.

Scott was straightening his tunic and seemed a bit startled by her presence near him, though pleasantly so. He stopped what he was doing

and gladly turned his full attention toward the bard. "Gabrielle, I ... I never got to know you very well ... but I know Dave, and I know how he feels about you, and ... well, you must be somebody pretty special."

"I guess you are too, Scott," she replied. "Xena doesn't call just anyone a friend."

That made Scott feel especially good, and he could not conceal a broad smile. The two embraced warmly. "Goodbye, Gabrielle," he whispered. "Thank you."

As they ended the hug, the bard turned to see Xena standing nearby, waiting. She backed away to allow the warrior a chance to say goodbye to Scott. Still, she dared not look at David for fear she might lose her composure.

"Xena," Scott began, feigning a scolding tone, "you've ruined me for life, you know. Now that I've known you, anyone else I meet is gonna seem boring."

The barest hint of a smile crossed her lips. "I'll miss you too ... 'Scotty'."

He laughed a little at the mention of Aphrodite's nickname for him. He took a step forward and reached out for Xena's hand. She clasped his forearm smartly as she would have a fellow warrior's and held on.

"You know," Scott said, looking her directly in the eye, "you wouldn't make a bad goddess of love yourself."

"Get in your machine," she replied, without changing her expression. They slowly released each other from the mutually understood substitute for an embrace and with a salute, Scott walked off toward the pod.

With a sad look in Gabrielle's direction, David now approached Xena. The warrior seemed a bit uncomfortable. She had little idea how to react to the man whom she felt had very nearly stolen her best friend away, yet whom she also knew that her best friend cared very deeply for.

"Xena," said David nervously, sensing her mixed emotions, "I want to thank you for everything. Especially for saving my life back in Theopolis."

"You needed help," she answered. "I guess I would have done it for anyone."

David nodded. "We have something very important in common, Xena."

For a moment, the warrior's steely blue eyes drilled into David's. Then at once, they softened and she reached out, taking him by the shoulders. "I know," she said. "We both care for Gabrielle very much."

"Xena," said David, "I know she's a big girl and can take care of herself, but ... well ... take good care of her, OK?"

"Count on it," she answered, a smile characteristically hidden behind her eyes.

"Thank you," he said, gently pulling her close. "Goodbye, Xena."

Gabrielle was biting her lip and looking nervously at the ground as she felt David's eyes upon her. As he slowly approached her, Xena and Scott each politely found other things to do.

"We have to say it sometime," said David softly.

As the bard looked up at him, a tear escaped her eye. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"Look up at the sky, Gabrielle," he said. She looked up to see a half-moon and the stars beginning to shine as darkness fell. "Remember how I told you the sky won't change much in three thousand years," continued David. "When I'm home and I look up, the stars and the moon will look almost exactly like this. So when I look at the sky, and you look at it here, we'll both be looking at the same sky. It'll almost be like we're together."

She silently smiled, and with eyes that were almost apologetic, she began to slowly shake her head.

His expression fell. "You're right," he finally said. "You're right. It's not enough. It's not nearly enough." He could barely choke out the words as the dam burst. With tears streaming uncontrollably down both of their faces, the two held each other so tightly that it hurt. For the last time, David ran his fingers through her hair, letting them drown in the cascading strawberry falls.

He wished he could take with him something, a lock of her hair, anything -- but he knew he could not, even if he tried. It all belonged to this time. Just like Gabrielle herself, he thought with an unbearably heavy heart.

"I'll never forget you," he vowed, "never."

"You better not," replied the bard as she tried to regain control, her arms still wrapped around David.

The birdsong from the pod seemed to grow louder now.

"Dave," Scott called reluctantly. When he had gotten David's attention, he held up a fisted left hand and, with his right index finger, tapped his own wrist.

David seemed to understand the gesture to mean that the departure of the pod was imminent. "I have to go," he told the bard.

"I know," she sadly replied.

"Gabrielle," he said, taking her gently by the shoulders, "don't ever stop doing what you do."

She smiled knowingly. "Goodbye, David," she said, almost in a whisper.

He lovingly kissed her hand and, finally letting go, turned and walked toward the waiting pod. He slowly climbed in and settled himself next to Scott. As Scott sealed the opening, David gazed intently at Gabrielle, wanting to burn her image into his mind for as long as he possibly could.

The bard's eyes never wavered from the pod as it began to take on the same eerie glow she remembered seeing a month ago, before she had ever heard of David Gold. The birdsong gave way to a loud buzzing which grew steadily more intense along with the glow, until slowly, it all faded from view. Except for a patch of ground that seemed slightly disturbed by the pod's weight, it was as though the mysterious travelers had never existed.

Gabrielle stared for a long time at the place where the pod had been, almost wondering herself if the events she remembered from the past month had actually happened. When Xena approached her and put a compassionate arm around her, she turned to the warrior and began to cry -- even harder than she had cried with David.

"I ... I'm sorry, Xena," she sobbed, "I can't help it."

"Gabrielle, you have nothing to be sorry for," Xena cooed softly as she held the bard. "It needs to come out. It's alright."

The twilight faded into darkness as Gabrielle's tears reached their inevitable end. Xena rekindled from embers the fire that had seared the flesh of the boar. She sat and stared into it as the exhausted bard lay down and rested her head on the warrior's lap.

"Xena," Gabrielle began, "I have to know something. How did you manage to hide your true intentions from the gods when they can see our thoughts? Especially when Ares was staring right at you."

"Well," answered the warrior, "there always was, and I guess always will be, a part of me that enjoyed my old ways -- a part that finds Ares' offers tempting. I just temporarily made those desires rise to the surface and cover over my true thoughts. It wasn't easy to do. And it wasn't easy to stay in control."

"Amazing," exclaimed the bard. "You fooled the gods, Xena. You even fooled the king of the gods!"

"Gabrielle, I would just as soon not be too loud about that. Maybe we can keep it to ourselves, huh?"

"Everybody around here wants to keep things secret," sighed Gabrielle. "Why, Xena?"

"The gods are pretty proud," Xena explained. "I have enough problems with them. I don't want them to blame me for their embarrassment. I'd really prefer not to be on their bad side."

Gabrielle thought for a moment. "David says they're not really gods at all -- just superior beings from another world who use their power to control us and take advantage of us."

"What's the difference?" Xena asked blankly.

Gabrielle's response was a wry grin and a change of subject. "Xena, I don't fall in love all that often, do I?"

"If you say so," answered the warrior with an affectionate smirk.

"So how come every time I do, it's somebody who ends up getting killed, or having to leave ..."

"Uh huh," Xena chimed in, "or he's already engaged ..."

"Yeah," mused the bard.

"Or he turns out to be a demon ..."

"That's enough examples, Xena."

"Sorry." Xena stroked the bard's hair. "Gabrielle, this is a hard kind of life you've chosen. It doesn't make it easy to latch on to a lasting relationship." She was silent for a time. "Our friendship is about the most solid thing I've ever had."

Gabrielle looked up at the gentle warrior. "Me too, Xena," she said. "I love you, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

The fire sputtered. Some sparks flew off and disappeared into the darkness.

"Xena ..."

"Yes, Gabrielle?"

"When we were talking about David and me getting married, you were going to tell me something. You never got to tell me. What was it?"

The warrior felt her face flush and she shifted uncomfortably. "It's ... not important right now. You need to get some rest."

Normally, Gabrielle would have pressed harder for an answer, but her body was indeed quite weary and so she quietly decided to follow Xena's prescription. She shifted a little to nestle her head more snugly into the warrior's lap.

Xena's eyes softened as she watched the bard and felt her relax. Her lips barely moved as she silently whispered. "I love you too, Gabrielle."

With little else but the quiet crackle of the fire filling her ears and the fingers of her closest friend in the world running slowly through her hair, the bard of Poteidaia drifted off to sleep and dreamed of a round earth amidst eternal stars.

* * * * *

Special thanks to Renee O'Connor, an actress of exceptional calibre,

for bringing to life the character of Gabrielle, for us all to know, love, dream about, and write about.

* * * * *

A TIME FOR US

by Theodore Williams (billted)

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EPILOGUE - 2086

A knock at the door of the trailer startled Professor Gold from his reverie. He had been busy packing for the trip back to Chicago and having sat down to take a break, he had become temporarily lost in thought. He touched the panel next to the door and it slid open with a hum.

"Hi, Scott," he said as the visitor was revealed.

"How's it going, Dave?" said Scott as he entered without an invitation. "You mean to tell me you aren't packed yet? I thought you'd be anxious to get back to your own office."

"Believe me, I am," replied David. "It's just that being here in Greece brings back a lot of memories." He laughed a bit. "I know that might seem silly."

"Silly? Why? The XX was only six months ago," Scott said, using the nickname the University had adopted for the Xena expedition. The expedition retained the honour of being the longest ever, though there were rumours of plans to send travelers to prehistoric times, involving Paleontology, a department which had been anxiously waiting for a crack at the Lorien pod. "By the way, have you submitted your paper on the ancient gods yet?"

"Not finished yet," said David. "Frankly, I'm really stuck on how to approach it."

"Boy," mused Scott, "when you publish that, it's going to set off some chain reaction -- all the way up to the SETI people. The idea that aliens actually resided on earth long term thousands of years ago."

"That's just it, Scott," David said. "We never really did get confirmation that they were actually aliens -- I mean, the way we're thinking of it."

"What do you mean, Dave? What else could they be? We saw enough evidence of their powers to know they weren't just charlatans."

"I mean they claimed to be gods," David explained, "and they never confirmed that they were just alien visitors with superior technology."

"So what are you saying?" Scott prodded. "That they were actually some kind of supernatural deities?"

"All I'm saying is that we don't know for sure *what* they were."

"Because if you say *that*," Scott continued, as though he hadn't heard David, "you'll get laughed right out of the University -- maybe even the whole scientific community."

David looked blankly past Scott, as though he were focused on something just beyond him. "TouchÃ©, Methodicus," he muttered.

"Anyway," Scott said, "It's been a little strange for both of us, being over here in Greece. We both have a lot of emotional investment in this place."

"That's for sure," said David. "You know Dr. Shanty wasn't too crazy about how ... personally involved we got on the XX."

"Denise was OK with it, I think," replied Scott. "She trusts our judgment. Her bosses were a little freaked out, though."

"Yeah, well, it makes me wonder why they brought us here to oversee the dig at all."

"Because we're the undisputed experts on Theopolis," Scott answered proudly. "It's only because of the data we brought back that they knew where to look for it."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," conceded David. "We've never found so many well-preserved artifacts from that era before. And we owe it all to the fact that Theopolis was buried under so much rock."

"Actually," Scott said, "that's what I came to talk to you about. There's something the team found in the ruins that I wanted to show you." He held up an almost intact scroll, still rolled up.

David looked at it, somewhat incredulous. "Are you sure that was found here?" he asked. "Everything here is well-preserved, but not this well."

"This seems to have been deliberate," said Scott. "Whoever buried it took a lot of trouble to make sure this parchment remained intact. It was sealed inside a ceramic jar -- nothing unusual there -- but then someone took the time to hollow out part of a boulder and seal the jar itself inside."

"Very interesting," David said, "but why didn't you just put it with the rest of the things? What else is so special about it?"

"Well, I opened it and read it," explained Scott, "And I decided that you should take a look at it." He held it out toward David. "Go ahead, read it."

David began to slowly open the scroll which, amazingly, was still supple enough to offer only the slightest resistance. As he caught sight of the quill strokes, he was struck with a vague sense of

familiarity.

"Are you reading, or just staring?" Scott asked impatiently.

David's eyes began to scan the ancient characters. It seemed to be a poem. He had not lost his fluency in ancient Greek, and the words drew him in as he mentally translated.

* * *

O Golden Love

Impossible to pursue

Were our love forbidden by the decree of kings

Then would I risk all to hold you in my arms

If 'twere the gods which put us asunder

Then would I entreat them ceaselessly

Till they should tire of my groanings and give you to me.

But 'tis naught but time itself which hath proclaimed we should never meet.

Yet have we indeed met --

Yet have we comforted one another --

Yet have we tasted of pleasures beyond our thoughts.

Together, we have climbed to the top of the highest mountain

And leaped off into a sea of the sweetest honey.

*

O my Golden One,

Thou art not, though I have known thee!

In truth have you not yet cast even a shadow upon this earth --

Yet my being burns for you each time the sun rises.

Countless kingdoms will rise and fall ere you draw your first breath --

Yet with every breath within me, I call your name day and night.

*

How may I remember him who has not been?

And how can I look back upon he who is to come?

*

My Golden David,

Beyond forever,

I am held to thee by our love,

And it is a tether that no power in heaven or earth can break.

* * *

David scratched his head nervously. "It ... um ... seems to be some sort of romantic lament," he said, trying to sound collected and professional.

"You know very well what it is," Scott said softly. "Don't deny it. That's why I brought it to you. It's your personal mail. Three thousand years in the dead letter office."

"You're getting pretty good at jumping to conclusions," David retorted.

"You know as well as I do, 'Golden David', that Gabrielle wrote that for you. That's why she sealed it up so well. She knew we'd dig it up someday."

"I don't know," David said absently, wanting to believe it, but afraid to.

Scott sighed, then reached into his pocket. "Look, I wasn't sure if this was important," he said, "but it was sealed up inside the jar along with that scroll. Maybe it'll mean something to you. I don't know." He held out a loosely closed fist to David.

David reached out and allowed Scott to drop the object into his hand. He held it in his palm and at first was unable to move. Then he slowly brought it closer to his face to see it more clearly. "The dove stone," he barely whispered. He rubbed the stone gently between his fingers, wondering if the ravages of time had rendered it fragile. Satisfied that it was as solid as ever, he squeezed it so hard that the edges dug into his palm. The lump in his throat threatened to cut off his air supply, and the salty moisture in his eyes was beginning to sting.

"Scott, I ... I need ..."

"It's alright, Dave," Scott said softly as he reached for the door panel. "Take all the time you need. Our plane leaves in the morning. I'll see you then, OK?"

David nodded appreciatively as Scott disappeared and the door slid closed behind him. For a while, he simply sat, alone with the dove stone and the scroll, which he was now certain had been penned by Gabrielle. He began to remember her more vividly than ever. He wished it weren't so. A part of him wished he could believe that it had all been just some elaborate dream. He couldn't move for some time, frozen solid by the painful memory of a love lost forever.

All at once, as by a sheer act of will, he briskly rose and left the trailer, taking the scroll and the stone with him. It was a short

drive to the eastern shore. On the way, he thought about the things he had told her when they said goodbye -- how he had pointed to the sky and said that if they both looked at the same stars, it would be as if they were together -- how they had both agreed what a futile, desperate attempt that was to stave off despair. It was definitely *not* good enough. But tonight, it would have to do.

When he arrived, he parked his hovercar a good distance from the water's edge. He wanted to get far from it, to feel isolated from technology, anything to help him recapture the feelings of the most wonderful month of his life.

He walked in the direction of the breaking waves, and when his car was finally out of sight, he sat down on the damp, white sand. He was grateful that it was the off season. At this time of night, he was all alone in the silvery moonlight. The empty beach, the infinite sea, the all-encompassing sound of the sea -- it all reminded him of the countless, though far too few, late evenings he had spent out here with Gabrielle, listening to her read her scrolls.

He looked at the scroll he held in his hand while he fingered the dove stone with the other. A stone, this well-preserved parchment, and probably most of the writings about Xena, fragmented and tattered as they were -- these things were all that were left of the bard he loved. It made him ache terribly to think that even her bones had long since turned to dust.

He exercised his will again and quickly drove the morbid thoughts from his mind, as he knew she would want him to do. As he brought himself again into tune with the woman that she was, it was no longer painful and paralyzing to think of her.

He imagined her face full of contemplation as she wrote the poem. He surmised that she had written it not longer after he left, while she and Xena were still near Theopolis. He wondered what the rest of her life had been like. One thing he hoped with all his might, that she had found one that could love her as deeply as he did. One with whom she could share her most intimate thoughts and feelings, pleasures and heartaches. And one who could stay longer than a month. Much longer. She deserved that.

He smiled as he thought of her sparkling eyes, her laugh, her kiss, the smell of her hair. He looked up at the Big Dipper and chuckled at the name. Holding inside him something that felt like more than memories, David Gold lay down on the sand and gazed at the night sky with his beloved.

* * * * *

Please let me know what you thought of the story. If time permits, please elaborate on what you liked or didn't like. You can email me at rheath@wpo.it.luc.edu. For my convenience, please include the word fanfic in the subject line. Thank you very much for reading.

TW (billted)

End
file.